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CALLIOPE

2000

Calliope 2000

Armstrong Atlantic State University
Volume XVII

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A Note from the Editors

For the past sixteen years, *Calliope* has been the medium through which many of Armstrong's students and staff have not only expressed but shared their creative talents with others on campus and in the community. We are confident that in the following pages, you will find that this tradition continues. We understand that many of you may be expecting a wordy introduction to this year's edition, but we feel that the high quality of the poetry, prose, and artwork showcased in this volume more than speaks for itself. So please, turn the page, and enjoy the first *Calliope* of the twenty-first century.

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Lindsay's Wolf
Mike Rios
pen and ink

Egesticulation

Jason Richardson

Slowly they move about my interior.
Kneading my shadows with their tiny wet hands.
Into an unfeeling phantom that forces me to
Shed and slough my skin like a
Venomous snake that discards its
Tired shell in a quivering
Dance of transmutation.

My light has seen the darkness.
My complacent mind has been
Sundered.
I'm reeling in a
Desensitized metamorphosis.

Small voices call to me
In exacerbating tones.
My many feet transform into
Broken wings.
My shadow is pushed and shoved
Down a darkening tunnel.

My matter's left crawling shadowless
In a void full of shadows.
I'm hollow.
Echoing back false visions
Of emptiness.

Finally I rest.
Cracked and collapsed,
I curl and spin
Deeper and deeper
Into the void.

View
Michelle Woodson
silver gelatin print

The Blind Leading the Blind

Steve Austin

I'm crouched in a room with four walls and two floors. That may sound crazy but floors can be ceilings too from a certain point of view. Here I'm stuck between these walls like a turnip in the exhaust pipe of your hateful neighbors car, or maybe like constipation. These purple walls stand brutally close, but they give me my privacy and protection. I don't usually complain or seem ungrateful, these walls keep me safe from brain sucking snoops, from my landlord that lives next door, and speaking of her, I'm two days late on my 100 dollar per week rent of which I have 100% of fifty-two cents. You see, sometimes my thoughts and emotions leak out of my head, leaving a vacuum of empty space. They float around in the air like radio waves. Anyone near me just has to grab those thoughts and emotions out of the air and interpret them. These walls act like the lead that shields Kryptonite from Superman. But more and more this insulation feels like a vault. A lead vault.

I live in a one-room apartment and it's small. There are five windows on three sides that rise from the chair rail to the ceiling. Thinking about the chair rails, I don't know why they're there. I have no chairs that need railing. And on top of the rails sit the windows, as I've already mentioned, and through these windows gleam thousands of beaming eyes. They watch me. They know me and all I do. I do, I do know they observe my daily routine. A routine that adds up to nearly nothing. Still it disturbs me. It would agitate you too.

I feel bad today. And it's a riddle... or a puzzle... I'm uncertain which, but I speculate that my skepticism is reasonable and more notably, a reality, and a mystery. A mysterious reality. My mind doesn't work like the average mind, not like a machine rotating on a microinterval time slot spitting out information through a revolving door. No, my mind is more like a maze, but not a fixed maze. Every time I find the way the structure of its walls rearranges itself into a new design, a new scheme, with a new way out. I never really get anywhere, like now. I guess I feel bad because I'm in morbid lack of my chemicals... yes, that's it. My Lithium, it's run out on me. Dr. Siecco said, and I quote, "This medicine won't let you down." Well, that's how smart he is! He never mentioned that I would have to do without. He's so calculating, so punishing, so imperceivably malicious. It's not any sort of conspiracy, he works on me alone. And he has his plans.

You must understand that I was in his office yesterday, which waasss... Friday, yesterday, and he was "out of town, out of town, out of

town," she says. I had to listen to that fat nurse babble her fat greasy lips about how "the alarm system has failed and that they couldn't fix it till Monday" and that "we've already paid them, they should come fix it today and bla bla bla." You know the kind. And I had to put up with this inanity for twenty-three minutes before she was "sorry to inform me that my medication couldn't be called in until Monday morning." I thought, "Monday... Monday!" I wanted to rip that big floppy mole off her face, but I didn't. I just proceeded to tell her just how fat she was and that she must be crazy to think that the alarm system technician should jump when she commanded. And I meant it.

"Calm down," I said to myself. Let's see. Returning my thoughts to the room where there is hardly room to turn around, I opened my eyes to see that these walls think they can push me around, they want to confine me. But I'll show them. I'm going to Dr. Siecco's office and I'm going to tell that vastly overweight nurse that I'll get my medicine whether she, the F.D.A., the F.B.I. or I.R.A. condones, complies, vetoes or denies my actions. It's a long walk, we'll talk more when I get there.

Imagine this, I walked all this way and they're "CLOSED SATURDAYS." I feel so... I'll tell you how I feel. I feel like the Wolf in the Three Little Pigs, huffing and puffing. But I won't, I can't, I have asthma. Oh but ah-ha, remembering the now very useful information that the maybe not-so-fat-nurse let slip out of her slippery lips—I contrived a plan. Aaaa plan. Through the window and in to the sample room I went. Chemicals chemicals and more chemicals. I should have been a chemist, doing experiments with hydrochloride, everything has got hydrochloride in it somewhere, I'd be making elixirs like neon and nylon and rayon. Synthetics and naturals, it was all there. There were boxes of Xanax and boxes Zoloft and "sealed for your protection" packets Tranxine, Transadone, pink Paxile, the "doctor recommended" Prozac and the "wonder drug" Dilanta, my favorite Methadone and... there it is... LITHIUM. Yes! Lithium, my life-line. I felt like the alien in that dumb movie that picked up the hat and cane and burst out with "Hello my baby, Hello my darling." What movie was that? Anyway, in thirty-three minutes I'll feel the surge of sanity flush through my veins. Grabbing a whole case of Lithium and Methadone I scooted on out the drug store. As I began my way out, the way opposite of the way in, the phone rang and I'm confident I heard the voice of Andy Rooney telling me to "pick it up boy, it is definitely for you." I answered it cynically, "Dr. Siecco's chambers, may I help you" and this obviously mad woman was on the other end screaming in complete hysteria, which is something all women go through at one point or another. She had a deep rasping voice, liked she smoked three packs a day for twenty-two years, or like she had bronchitis the flu and a bad case of hemorrhoids, or like she had been on a two week drug binge. I pictured her with dark hair and overlapping wrinkles, and fat. This lady first stated that she had never been seen by Dr.

Siecco and then commenced to ranting about this and raving about that and crying and blubbering so that I could not make out what she was saying. As she went on the light bulb that was implanted in my head during my lobotomy last spring lit up. I mean my eyes could have been mistaken for a state trooper's mag light. I've contrived another plan.

You see, since my diagnosis I've always wanted to be on the other side of the table, I've always dreamed of getting in someone else's head, scrambling a brain—like an egg. And if you can't have directed power you must get power by manipulation and what better mask to manipulate behind than that of a psychiatrist. It's a perfect disguise. The ambiguously crazy overly friendly face. I said to her, "if you'll shut your hole for a minute I can help you." I must have made a good impression because a burning silence crowded the moment, a gravity that I had not wanted. After I pulled myself together I told her that I was Dr. Siecco, and although I was the only one working today I could see her if and only if she could be here by four o'clock, it was now two-thirty. A genius I must be, I thought to myself, but it would have to be done carefully and would need some preparation. She said that she would come and smashed the phone down on the hook. Her phone fell into pieces and lay abandoned on the kitchen counter—all alone. I really felt for that telephone but I had no time to waste.

"Thank you Andy," I shouted with an exclamation point! I made my way to the men's room and as I gazed into the mirror I noticed I needed some slight cleaning up. I ran home, showered, shaved, and put on a knit shirt and khaki pants, a dress Dr. Siecco often sported. I decided to put off taking my daily dose to add a spark to my personality. Half jogging half walking back to my office, careful not to work up a sweat, I felt a great excitement, a feeling of accomplishment and importance. Once back I scanned Dr. Siec... I mean, my bookshelf for a reference book and by luck I stumbled on the perfect resource. It was titled "Psychiatric Practices of the 19th Century." For a moment I thought the book to be out of date but I considered that being 1999 and the New Year was not for another three months, I could settle with its contents.

The next thing I knew, I had gotten lost in the rather cruel treatments this book had to offer. I'm thankful that my doctor had not yet used these treatments on me. I guess he hadn't read this book lately. But just to be on the safe side I'll take the book with me when I leave."

"What do you know," I said aloud, "it's two and a half minutes after four. On the Mahogany desk is one of those precise clocks that count the seconds and minutes, and hours, and days, and years. It even specifies the A.M. and P.M. A clock that could only belong to a man of science. You probably have to have some sort of scientist license or prescription to get one.

One minute and forty-one seconds later, I heard the woman come

through the door saying, "hello." For the first time today, I felt scared, scared, this is scary. But there is some excitement to speak of and sometimes the two cannot really be separated or split apart or split open. As I began to speak I started to tremble, my heart pounding, sweat secreting, shaking like one of those little vibrating massage things.

"Come on back onto my office" I said maybe a little too loudly. She scurried in the door and sat down across from me in my real leather chair. I was right about the dark hair, it was long and jet black, but I must apologize about the other presumptions. She was tall, about six feet tall and long and slender with no wrinkles at all. She must have been thirty. A good thirty. She was voluptuous and vivacious with only one flaw. She was here, for treatment. "I wonder if she is gay," I said to myself.

"Don't I have to fill out any forms?"

"Ahhh..." I reached for a prescription pad and slid it across the smooth surface of my gorgeous Mahogany desk. "Just print your name, race and sexual prefer... I mean sex and I'll fill out the forms for you."

"Well aren't my sex and race obvious?"

"Oh... yes, yes, yes they are, I mean breasts like yours couldn't possibly belong to a man. I just need your information on that little pad there for ah... administrative purposes."

"What ever. I have no insurance."

"No insurance huh? Well that's a shame but no shame here. I will insur... I mean assure you that I have the lowest reputation... I mean, lowest rates in town. Cheap. Very cheap. Yes, cheap cheap cheap."

"I'll believe that when I see it."

"See what?"

"The low rates," she said.

"They say seeing is believing."

"Yes they do."

"Ah, but do they yes," I said. Quizzing her for attention, cognition, and perception.

"What?"

"No... nothing. As you were saying..."

"I haven't said anything yet."

"What?"

"What? Look Dr. 'whatever your name is,' can we get started?"

"By all means. Start by telling me what I couldn't understand over the phone. Here, take this first, it's methadone. It'll make you tingle inside. And why not a drink? Let's see... how about a whiskey and ginger, my nurse keeps me stocked. Listening to a bunch of lunatics chatter all day can make an alcoholic out of anyone. Not to mention crazy."

"Well speaking of crazy, I think I'm going mad."

"We psychiatrists don't like using the word mad. We like to think of it as a mental disorder. But go on."

"To start with, my husband is acting very odd lately. Him and that damn dog. He loves that dog but I think it's more than puppy love. He adores that dog. Ever since I've been having problems he sleeps in the spare bedroom, with Lovely, that's the dog's name. He won't go anywhere without her and he locks himself up in that room with Lovely and sometimes when I try to go in, he won't open the door. He tells me to leave them alone. Leave *them* alone he says! I think he's having an affair with her. Does that seem unreasonable to you?"

"Hey, who the hell am I to say what's odd and what isn't."

"But it's much more than that, that's only the beginning."

"Yes, go on."

"Well, last week I was in my doctor's office having x-rays taken of my back and I felt them, the x-rays entering my neck and my skin started to tingle and I felt a burning sensation as they passed down my back in a hot tingling strip about six inches wide and then to my waist. Then they disappeared into my stomach which felt cold and numb and solid like it was frozen. It's been keeping me from my afternoon erection."

"I would think a woman like yourself couldn't get an erection."

"Erection! I said reflection. They keep me from thinking. Reflection!"

"No you said erection."

"I most certainly did not, I said reflection."

"You said erect... never mind, either way your are going mad."

"What a minute, you said you don't like using that word."

"No, I said I don't like patients using that word."

"Oh... I'm sorry, I misunderstood you."

"Well that's perfectly normal for a mad woman."

I really felt like we were getting somewhere, like I was helping this woman. I am smart you know. But I could feel the tension. She looked. I blinked. She scowled. I shuddered. The electrons in the air were thick, the molecules in her head were thin. I had to cut through the pressure, so I raised the blade and let it fall.

"To be such a fool, you are very beautiful."

"Well thank you doctor, I really admire you."

"You do?"

"Yes I do. May I ask, Doctor, what do you admire?"

So I thought and I thought until finally, it came to me. "I admire clucking chickens, cud-chewing cows, mostly farm animals, and the wheel, the strength of the triangular shaped triangle, and quicksand... yes quicksand! It's the ground on which nothing can stand. Enough about me, can

you tell me anything else, Ms. Pluto?"

"Sure, I can talk all day."

"Well at forty-two dollars an hour I wouldn't recommend that."

"Forty-two dollars an hour!"

"That's the cheapest you'll find anywhere."

"Where?"

"Where? Here or there. Call around, that's the cheapest, cheap cheap cheap. So go on."

"Well sometimes I here the voice of Dan Rather from across the street." Now that was odd because Andy Rooney and Mr. Rather work together or at least pass each other in the halls at work. Maybe she's purposely projecting her delusions onto me. That is possible you know. "He reports all that I do. The other day I was eating a banana and I heard him telecast, 'and now she's peeling the banana...I've just learned that she's putting it in her mouth, boy she has a large mouth. She chews her food well ladies and gentlemen. Now she's holding it like a, well I can't say this on national television, but you know what I mean. She has a dirty mind. And now she's throwing it away because she knows that we know what she is up to.' And I did throw it away. That man drives me nuts."

"Yes, yes, I can see that. First of all, I would suggest not watching CBS any more. Try CNN, they've really got it together lately."

"And sometimes I feel like I'm running around like a chicken with my head cut off."

"Wait a minute! I believe I've read about that somewhere. I know I've heard of that. Hmmm...yes. It was 'The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Feather,' a story about a bunch of quacks in an insane asylum who took over the place. Yes I have read some literature on this delusion of yours."

"Well, It's not really a delu...."

"Let me finish, please. Yes, it was an essay by the infamous psychic and psychiatrist, not to mention a world-renowned physiologist Poe...yes, Poe was his name...and he wrote about lunatics who believed themselves to be other things, such as a tea pot and a donkey and one, as a matter of a fact, thought himself to be a chicken. The essay was a nineteenth century document and should therefore apply to you."

"Nineteenth century? No, that was over a hundred years ago. You've got your centuries mixed up. It is the twentieth century."

"First of all, I do not get mixed up. Second, it is the nineteenth century. I can't imagine where you get your information from, but it's wrong."

"No, I'm not wrong. I'm right."

"So then, *Ms. Genius* over there, how is it the twentieth century being that it is 1999. Nineteen hundred, nineteenth century."

"No, the first century 0 A.D. to 99 A.D. was the first, and the year

100 till 200 was the second. That's how I'm right, thank you very much."

"That's ludicrous. What did you do with the lowest number? What's the lowest number?"

"One is the lowest number," she said confidently, but watch, I'll show her.

"No, ma'am. Zero is the lowest number and being the lowest century, labeling it with the lowest number is only reasonable. You can't skip zero and expect to get away with it. Zero is necessary. Can't skip zero. If you forget zero the whole rational world will fall and probably land directly on your head." There was a blank look in her face and her eyes seemed hollow as she pondered upon my words. "Anyway let's get back to your chicken shit problems," I said.

"Not chicken shit, it's a decapitated chicken."

"I know that, and as I was trying to tell you, the essay had a rather unique strategy for handling brain malfunctions like yours. It was said that if one were to treat one as he or she believed themselves to be, that a person would grow out of the delusion. From what I understood, the treatment had a very good result. You see, when one is treated in this way, a certain and specific colloidal effect takes place within the synapse of the frontal lobe of the cranium and has a exponential positive effect on one's state of consciousness, not to mention the District of Columbia's unconscious controlled substance laws, such as opium has a direct effect on one's dreams."

"Hold on a minute. I have not the slightest clue as to what you just said, but it sounds good. So you're telling me that if others treated me like a chicken with my head cut off, then I would stop feeling like one."

"Absolutely," I told her.

"Well, I'll try anything."

"Okay then, I'll prescribe you three and one half quarts of chicken feed a day. I guess you can find it in your local Feed and Seed." I thought for a moment and suddenly I realized, I had made a dreadful mistake, how could I have done such a preposterous thing? I only hope that I can resolve this situation before it gets out of hand or before my cover is blown. "Ma'am, I hate to tell you of my mistake, seeing as how I make so very few. Maybe we can just call it an overlooking."

"Yes yes go on, what?"

"Seeing as how you are supposed to be a headless chicken, chicken feed is kind of a ridiculous idea, isn't it? I mean, shoving the seed down your throat could get monotonous. So, let's see...how about twelve hours a day in a chicken coop, yes that should work fine. But no more than twelve a day and discontinue treatment when the problem disappears but not suddenly. For such strong treatment as this, you must use a "tapering down effect." Such as twelve one day then ten for two days then eight for

two days and so on, and it's very important that you do it in that method. I'm sure your husband will build you a coop, I know he and the dog could use the privacy."

"Don't you think that is a little extreme?"

"NO! Let's move on. I think for your little x-ray/erection episode we should definitely take a Freudian approach. And Freud liked to experiment with cocaine. So I'll write you a prescription for....let's see, one gram per every two days. If the pharmacist gives you any trouble tell him to call my office, and I'll verify the appointment and prescription. Yes, let's do that and I'll give you three weeks worth of Methadone and Lithium."

"Wow, I didn't know nuts could get so much fun out of a visit," she said with a bouncing tone. Maybe like a ball bouncing around inside her head. A necessarily empty head.

"So you should be feeling much better real soon and I hope you can get your ahh...inadequacies and inferiorities filled to a more ah....appropriate level. Thank you Ms. Pluto, keep your nose clean and everything will be okay." I thought to myself, when she tells the pharmacist about her visit, they'll really think she nuts.

"Well okay Dr. Siecco, I guess I'll see you in a month?"

"Yes, call my lovely nurse and make an appointment for any day of your choosing, except Saturdays." She gave me 100% of forty-two dollars and left my office. Seeing as how her paranoia was beginning to make me nervous, I snorted another Methadone. I realized that if I could not come up with $56.48 that I would soon be a homeless lunatic and the last thing I want is to be put back in that dreadful hospital. But what if—I have contrived a plan. If I gave my landlord all the money I had, I could move all of my belongings to one side of the room and tell her that I promise to use only 42.52% of my apartment, which would mean a drastic cut in space but a much smaller area to keep clean. Yes, that should definitely work.

I left my office through the front door, which was not the way I came in. And I was walking home when I suddenly began to feel a little guilty, but why should I? Do you think what I just did was all that bad? I don't, it's being done all the time, just not usually on Saturdays.

Persephone's Kiss
Elizabeth Pferschy
silver gelatin print

School of Fish

Erin Helmey

I sat separate and alone, spanning the sea
of faces who were smiling at violence
and laughing at death. I wondered
Did they really know
what the shattering, spinning, seething
shots would do to their fresh, delicate bodies?
but their flashing teeth spelled no; I guess
horror and loss are humorous.
salty water welled in my eyes
as I could see the guilty and innocent blood
pooling together in this earthy pot
on cold, lifeless school floors,
the base of knowledge
which brings America to its end.
as my first tear splashed on the sandy floor,
the bullets rang out, and each of the immature,
welcoming faces was lost forever in their own
current of false hopes and dreams.

Towards the Shadows
Pia Kokko
silver gelatin print

A Word to the Wise

Laura Bonney

Well, the weather was so nice
That, against all sage advice,
I packed my gear and headed for the trees.
Camping out for me is fun,
Choice of leisure, number one;
Pitch my tent, go fishing, do just what I please.

I can't say I wasn't warned,
But their warnings wise I scorned,
When the old folks said, "You'd do well to remember
Indian Summer doesn't last
And by now it should be past.
You should never
Go tent-camping
In November."

All went well my first day out,
Caught my supper, two nice trout;
Lovely evening with a mild and gentle breeze.
With the dawn there came a rain
But I still could not complain,
Stayed inside and read, still perfectly at ease.

THEN…a gale began to blow
And that rain, it turned to snow
And the mercury dropped down into December.
I packed up to head for home,
Indian Summer sure had flown;
I should not have
Gone tent-camping
In November.

Dropped my compass in the snow-
Didn't know which way to go-
Stepped into the stream, got wet above my knees;
Then bronchitis did set in
With pneumonia as its twin,
And every cough was followed by a sneeze.

Forest rangers brought me back
when their bloodhound found my track,
(But that's the part I really don't remember.)
I woke here in ICU;
This is my own fault, it's true,
All because I
Went tent-camping
In November!

Claw
Steve Coward
silver gelatin print

Lenny
Maryanna Axson
graphite

Pen-Pal

Richard DiPirro

I leaned over the counter and waved my hand to attract the bartender's attention. He was a young guy, about the same age as me, and he was hustling. I caught his eye as he finished blending a pitcher of Margaritas for some girls to my left, and after a few minutes I had a nice, cold draft and a fresh shot of Cuervo in front of me. I paid and left him a dollar in the empty shot glass and made my way to a table in the back of the club.

I wasn't as drunk as usual, and it was a nice change. I hadn't been to this particular den of sin for a long time. It was a fast place, with the music pounding, lights whirling around, and multitudes of beautiful women moving and dancing with the most practiced predators in town. Clothes reflected the highest fashion and the attitudes were timeless. Everyone was laughing and smiling as they danced, and yet, the atmosphere was anything but happy. I smiled along as I watched, amused by the spectacle.

I drank my beer and watched the people circulate and interact throughout the club. I could barely see the dance floor through the throng of dependency around and in front of me. People were arriving steadily, and the club was filling quickly.

A flash of twirling black hair on the dance floor caught my eye, and I stretched my neck to see around a couple in front of me. I caught the back of a head spin, and long, straight, shiny black hair tossed itself up into the air and fell down again with the beat. It was a woman, and she moved out of my sight before she could turn again and reveal her face to me.

My eyes were wide and I stood quickly, disturbing the table. I grabbed my beer and made my way down through the crowd toward the dance floor. The music was loud, and the beat thudded throughout my body, entraining with my heartbeat, and leading my mind. I pushed my way forward urgently, holding my beer high so people would avoid me. My eyes darted ahead, searching.

There. She spun again and her hair bounced into my line of vision. I made my way through the last barrier of hounds, and there she was. The music pumped a heavy-metal song with a deep, grinding bass, and she turned with a flip of her head, and there was no question that it was her.

*

It was her, and I was nineteen again, and the speakers were all blasting the latest dance music. The clubs were smaller, and they were filled with smoke and fresh-washed military men. And for every young, hard-working, American momma's boy on liberty in Subic Bay, in the Philippine Islands, there were ten girls with long or short, straight, shiny black hair who wanted to take him home, or to a motel with them. I had seen her then as I saw her now - dancing; only then she had moved in a bathing suit, on a platform. She was one of four on the runway that first night, and I was mobbed by the "Buy-Me-Drink" ladies, but she flipped her head in turn with the music, and her hair flashed into my eyes.

*

I watched as she turned and offered her full profile to me now, and any lingering doubt I might have had faded away like a bad dream. It was her, in a tight, black body-skirt which held her body like it was designed for her. Her legs began where the skirt stopped short, and they were hard and muscular from her dancing. Her face was glowing and wet with sweat, and I was glad that her eyes were closed.

My buddies and I had bragged to each other often about the women we had as we sailed throughout Southeast Asia in our prime, but I had never told them, never told anyone about this one. The feelings I had for her, the absolute effect she had on me, were something I was not proud of.

*

On that night I first saw her, I drank too much, and my friends dragged me to another bar, which I left with another woman. I was thinking about her, though, and on our next stop in Subic I approached her, and offered to buy her a drink. We danced close, and as I looked into her dark eyes I was lost in them, and my homesickness and anxieties about living up to everyone's expectations disappeared in one slow song. She drank my drinks and let me pay twenty dollars for her "bar-fine" for the evening.

We left the club early, and I fed her. She didn't speak English very well, and I knew only a few sordid expressions in her language. This removed the pressure of talking, and we just

laughed and touched each other instead. She threw around some of the regular lies in English, though, and she kept me happy with ambiguous comments about my strength and good looks.

I slept away from the ship that night, with her, in a small bed in a small room. We were tired from the drink, the dance and the sex, and she slept soundly. I lay awake with my eyes open, staring at her soft skin, watching her nose flare as she breathed. When it was time, I woke her, and we made arrangements to spend time together on my next visit, for only a small portion of my paycheck. I kissed her deeply before I left, and we parted without speaking.

*

My glass was dry, but I couldn't leave her there on the dance floor, convulsing and gyrating her talented body. I knew as I looked around that I was hardly the only one intent on her sweat and compulsive body language. Many pairs of eyes were upon her, and many other brains were occupied with their respective decadent fantasies about her; fantasies I had lived.

*

I spent my next three visits to P.I. with her. I slept at her place, and she cooked for me and cleaned and pressed my uniforms. I bought her groceries and clothes. I bought her.

We went water-skiing together and had picnics on beautiful Philippine beaches. I taught her the name of my hometown and showed her pictures of my family. She told me stories of her father fighting the Japanese, and taught me how to catch snakes. She told me that the lizards crawling on her walls spoke to her and warned her in their clicking tones when visitors approached. I enjoyed her, and I enjoyed being away from the ship and my thousands of ill-smelling, loud and ugly brother Marines and sailors living there.

We wrote to each other while I was out at sea. Each helicopter would bring a letter from her, written in a Creole of her language and mine. She wrote of missing me, and her desire to travel to the United States. She wanted to marry an American man, she wrote, and work as a nanny, or as a secretary in a big office. I smiled and wrote how I longed to smell her hair and lie between her smooth legs in the warm Philippine sand.

On my last visit, we celebrated the anniversary of our

ship's christening with a huge party at a local resort hotel. She and I were there, and we ate roast pig and squid and fresh fruit, and lost money betting on the cockfights. We swam together in the hotel's huge outdoor pool and dried each other off tenderly. That night, she called me another man's name as we made love, and I bit her hard, on her calf. She writhed in pain and orgasm, and I tasted her blood. I left without a word and dressed in the dark street as I walked back to the ship.

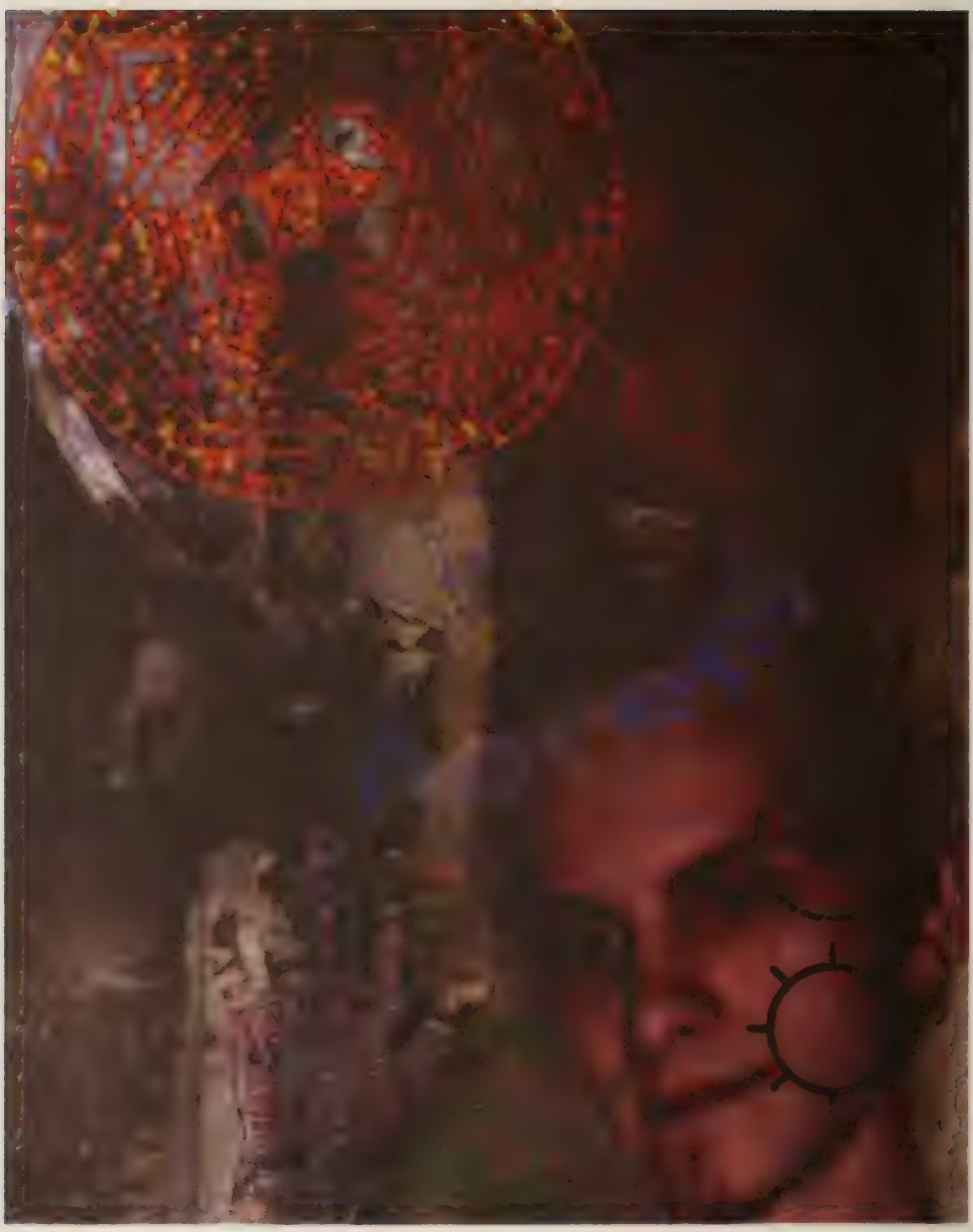
*

The beat slowed to a steady grinding pulse, and it moved her body with muscular discipline. She danced closer to where I was sitting now and I saw, outlined against the sharp definition of her calf, the slight discoloration of a scar. She spun her head toward me and I felt a droplet of her sweat alight upon my arm. Her eyes were open now, and they were wide and blank. She looked past me, through me, nowhere. She spun again, and long, straight, shiny black hair flowed through the air like water.

I never spoke of her to anyone, and her pictures aren't in any of my photo albums. I keep them separate, in an envelope in my closet. I burned all of her letters long ago; all except one, which I keep with the pictures. The letter is written in her hybrid style, and in it she talks of reptiles and food and American movies. It feels old now, and the writing is fading away.

She was gone. The music stopped, the lights came on, and everyone stumbled toward the door. I looked at my lap and no one spoke to me as they walked past, which was just as well. If anyone had asked me why I was crying, I wouldn't have known how to answer.

My Monet
Bill Bates
acrylic on canvas



Heretic
Andrew Sparrow
computer collage

Portrait of "Bob"
Amy Lyn Kidane
acrylic on canvas

Untitled
Sharon McCusker
acrylic on canvas

OIC

IM1 (2AP) U
IM1 (2T) U
IM1 (2U) U

OIC

IMA (DZZZ) 2U
RU1 (2Y) 2CIMB92U
IM1 (2E) U

OIC

UR (2Y) 2C

Heaven

Robert Lurie

Phil's backpack and his trudging legs were all I saw during our ascent into heaven. All four of us climbed laboriously, wearing halos of swirling horseflies. After hours and hours of ascent, my mind had gone numb. My body kept slugging away at the climb with about as much efficiency as one could expect from defective machinery.

Charlie led our group, striking an Indiana Jones pose with his rugged physique. Winston followed, desperately trying to keep up. Phil kept his own steady pace, singing gleefully as the sweat ran down the back of his neck, and I panted, puffed, panted, groaned, dying slowly, falling behind.

I began to feel that Charlie was working me, like a drill sergeant would work his new recruits, and I made a silent vow to get in better shape before our next excursion. We didn't stop until we reached the peak. The air was clear and dry at the top, and the bothersome flies were now nowhere to be seen. From the ridge we were able to gaze down into the Holy valley: a fertile, forested land surrounded on all sides by jagged peaks. I collapsed on the grass.

"Power Bar?"

I focused my eyes on Phil's face looming over me. He was prodding me with a sort of granola bar.

"It has the calorie count of a Thanksgiving meal," he said.

"Sure. Thanks."

Winston had broken out a bag of GORP trail mix and was passing it around. Charlie paced back and forth restlessly. I think he was afraid that he would lose momentum if he rested too long.

I gnawed at my Power Bar and raised my canteen above my head, letting the water flow over my face and off the edge of my chin, spattering on my clothes and the ground. Phil sat next to me, rocking quietly back and forth.

"Are we ready yet?" Charlie asked.

"Christ, Charlie," I said, "yer killin' me!"

He stared at me.

"Okay, I'm ready."

The rest of the hike was relatively easy. It was mainly a descent into the valley, sometimes steep, sometimes quite manageable. Charlie took the lead again with Phil following close behind, alternately talking, singing, and laughing. I followed Phil. Winston took the rear.

"Randy, where did you meet this guy?" Winston asked, gesturing

at Phil.

"We met in Minneapolis, in grade school, but I haven't seen him for a few years. He's really changed."

"What do you mean?"

"He seems more cheerful now. He used to be...kind of dark, I guess. He's also lost a lot of weight."

"Why did he come out here?"

"I have no idea."

"He just showed up on your doorstep?"

"More or less."

Winton laughed. "You know, Charlie's taken to calling you the Kaaba."

"What's that?"

"It's this sort of shrine in the Mohammedan religion, a kind of central holy place that people from all over the world travel to visit. You're the Kaaba. You came out here to the Northwest and people from all over the country have arrived at your door, seeking wisdom and shelter. First there was that guy from Athens, Georgia. What was his name?"

"Jake."

"Jake, yeah. Then there was that van full of guys from Virginia, and now, this guy Phil from Minneapolis."

"Hmmm. Well, I wish I could trade some of that so-called wisdom for some of Charlie's endurance."

"Don't worry. You're doing fine."

Phil and Charlie were already disappearing from sight. Winston and I stepped up our pace so we could catch up. The path had narrowed to a zigzagging causeway, interrupted periodically by rock piles or streams flowing through. We stopped again to take a short break at a miniature waterfall that descended from an unspecified point above, collecting on our little rocky path and spilling our into the depths below. Winston, Phil and I stretched out on the rocks. Charlie remained standing. He stared up at the peaks.

Charlie surprised me by taking the rear when we returned to the path. Winston led, I followed, and Phil walked with Charlie, talking excitedly about his plans to enroll at the University of Washington in the fall.

We crossed through several different terrains during our descent into the valley. We emerged from what had been a jungle-like sheltered path onto an open cliff road that seemed to have been carved by the gods from the rock slate of the mountain. The sun beat down on us, through our heads, through our hearts, through the soles of our shoes and through the very earth. As we got closer to our destination and moved to a lower altitude, the humidity returned, and with it, the onslaught of flies.

"Don't worry," Charlie said from behind me, "these flies will disappear by nightfall."

The rocks on the path were gradually replaced by mud, and our descent finally came to an end. We crossed over a roaring creek, one by one, tip-toeing precariously across a rickety bridge that appeared to be as old as the mountains. We finally reached a small, grassy clearing that was surrounded by trees.

"Here," Charlie said, "This is where we sleep."

I let the frame backpack fall from my shoulders and felt the circulation return to my arms.

We hung the backpacks from the trees and made camp. Phil and Charlie gathered some wood and built a small fire. We sat around the flames and smoked pipes as daylight receded. The light illuminated the faces of my three friends, keeping darkness just a few steps outside of our circle. I could see the outlines of the jagged peaks above, an even darker darkness blotting out the stars.

Phil, the born storyteller of the group, spun tales of Minneapolis mischief and vaguely alluded to family conflicts that had caused him to bolt for the Northwest. The two of us indulged in anecdotes about our common home and the people we had known.

"You remember Carlito Sanchez of course," he said, arching his back and pushing his chin upward, assuming the pose of a peacock. "Hey hey hey," he said in a mock Mexican accent, "Randy Donahower, the stallion, the stallion, le's go git girlies Randy. Oh c'mon, cause I'm the man I have class!"

I nearly fell backwards laughing, "Yes! Yes! Carlito Sanchez. I remember."

"Shit," Phil chuckled, "That guy used to have a new Armani suit every day. And his family was dirt poor. He'd come to class with his hair all slicked back. A real Mexican James Dean. Guess what he's doing now?"

"What?"

"He's a Goddamned school bus driver!"

I started laughing again.

"Can you imagine it?" he continued, "hey, hey little girlie, git on my bus. You lookin' real pritty girlie I'll treat you right cause I'm the man!"

"A fucking bus driver! Carlito Sanchez! Who would have known? Who would have known?"

Winston made his PHFSCHHH sound, which was his way of laughing. If he thought something was particularly funny he would let out a PHFSCHHH which sounded a bit like air leaking out of a cut car tire.

"Why do you do that?" Phil asked.

"Do what?"

"You do this PHFSCHHH thing. It's like you want to laugh but you're afraid to, so you stop it as it's coming out and it just goes PHFSCHHH. Why don't you relax and let it out, man?"

"PHFSCHHH!"

We talked and laughed for hours. Finally, growing weary, we crawled into our tents. Charlie had his own tent, while Winston, Phil and I were sentenced to sleep side by side in a small igloo-shaped tent. This arrangement put Winston at a disadvantage. He tossed and turned, trying vainly to sleep while Phil and I chattered away about Minneapolis. Phil recounted an incident when he had almost run over my girlfriend with his big brown Suburban. This prompted me to recall the massive keg party Phil and his friend had organized, having the nerve to stage it on the Minnehaha Creek bike path at 6:00 AM, before heading off to school for the day.

Much laughter ensued. Winston groaned in agony. We didn't stop until we had exhausted every minor story.

I was the first to wake up the next morning. I was greeted with the unpleasant sensation of being sandwiched between Winston and Phil. Winston's face was pressed up against one side of my head and Phil's was affixed to the other. Both were snoring. I elbowed them in the ribs simultaneously and sat up, breathing in the musty tent air.

"I've slept what, maybe two hours?" Winston moaned, "I thought you guys would never stop talking. Now I know your life stories. I had dreams about the people in your Goddamn stories, and I've never even been to Minneapolis!"

"Ah go fook yerself, me laddy," Phil said in a mock Irish accent. He burst out of the tent in his long underwear. We could see his legs bouncing up and down outside the tent flaps. "Fook yerself, fook yerself! Ha ha ha!" His voice echoed throughout the valley. Winston labored with the effort of sitting up. His compressed forest of curls jutted straight up from his head in a solid mass.

"Randy, your friend is nuts."

I crawled out of the tent. Phil was wandering around the campsite. Charlie sat, fully clothed, boiling water over the fire. "You boys slept in," he said.

I pulled a granola bar out of my pack and sat down next to Charlie. Winston emerged from the tent with his pipe.

We sat around in silence and had a breakfast of oatmeal mash. One by one, the flies began to advance. "We need to get to a high elevation before the flies really set in," Charlie said. "There's an old abandoned mine at one of the peaks. I say we head for that. It's a good five miles up."

We hastily got our gear together and started hiking, desperately trying to increase our elevation as the flies emerged in full force. WE trudged forward along a narrow dirt path, crossing the occasional stream by hopscotching over the rocks scattered in the water. Eventually, we came to a clearing. The jagged peaks were visible on all sides. Phil's high-

pitched, slightly off-key singing echoed eerily through the valley. I noticed Winston was beginning to loosen up. Occasionally, he would yelp along with Phil. Winston was known as a fine saxophonist; he had a reputation for making his instrument sing with sensitivity and grace. Unfortunately, that talent didn't translate well to his vocal capabilities. He and Phil singing together sounded like two dying coon dogs. Ah, but what the hell, I joined in too. Charlie started walking faster, hoping a more strenuous pace would keep us from disrupting nature in such an unholy manner.

As we progressed higher, patches of snow and ice gradually replaced the streams. I could see now the dark opening of the old mine, a sort of cannon-blast hole blown out of the side of the peak.

I have never been more aware of the workings of my body than at that moment. I could feel every breath, every footstep, the creak and strain of every muscle, every blink of the eyes. For the first time in my life I realized that I had no control over time. It kept moving at that same steady pace, beating down on this body and this mind with an uncontrollable wrath. As we reached the open portal of the mine, I understood for the first time that there is an end.

We had not thought to bring flashlights, but Charlie had a penlight, and so, once again, he led the group. The mine disappeared behind us, finally becoming a little ball in the distance. Phil made "OOO OOO OOO" owl sounds as our little beam guided us. Charlie shone it into alcoves, searching for bats, but there were none. I kept imagining an old ragged man, his eyes corroded from living in the mine for years, his body and face gaunt from a steady diet of bat flesh. If there was such a man, though, we didn't find him. Our descent into darkness was a long stretch of muddy nothingness, which finally ended with a solid brick wall.

"Man, can you believe all the horrible things that must lie beyond this wall?" I said, "too bad we can't see them. Let's go back."

Phil started kicking at the wall.

"Come on Phil," Winston said, "you're likely to get us buried. Let's get out of here."

The penlight reversed direction and Charlie slid past me. We followed him back and out, through our little portal and out into the light.

We stood at the entrance for a few minutes, getting acclimated to the sun.

"Let's see if we can get any higher on this peak," Charlie said. Without waiting for an answer he began climbing. A huge glacier covered the width of the peak, but the foundation had melted out from the summer heat and had become the numerous streams coming down from the peaks, so the inside of the glacier was essentially hollow. I watched as Charlie disappeared underneath it. We followed with slight hesitation. I found I was able to stand upright in a dripping ice cavern with about five feet to spare. The cavern stretched on and sloped upwards for about a hundred

feet to a hole and sunlight. Charlie had already disappeared through this opening. I walked slowly, letting the glacial rain cool my skin. I came out onto a small stretch, which had been exposed by the sun. We were literally at the top of the mountain. Charlie stared out at the massive expanse. He inhaled deeply; it was almost as if he were swallowing up the entire mountain range. There was an affectation of triumph in his stance.

Having found a little nook where I could sit comfortably and gaze at the valley, I let myself ebb out of my body and become part of the land. My eyes, the last remaining physical connection, blinked rapidly, and I was gone.

I flew around the peaks, through the peaks, even, through rock, which had been thrust violently into the world in ancient times. I relived the origin, the collision of the plates, centuries of shift and change in fast forward, the incredible violence of birth and rebirth. I saw myself sitting in my nook. I saw myself in California at the age of six, play-kissing with a girl from up the street. I saw myself years later, walking with another girl across a frozen lake in Minneapolis. I saw myself lying drunk in the grass in Gary's backyard in Georgia at dawn. And finally, I saw Phil, a long-buried memory, Phil ravaged with pain, holding onto his father's arm and sobbing. His father, unshaven, with madness in his eyes, walked down the church aisle. Then, with the splatter of a solitary glacial drop on my forehead, I was back in the nook. My eyes opened. Charlie lay stretched on the ground, slumbering peacefully. Winston sat with his back to the rock face, his head tilted backwards, eyes closed, mouth slightly open. Phil sat cross-legged staring out at the valley and quietly rocking back and forth. The only indication of how long I had slept was the sun hanging low on the horizon.

"Did you sleep?" I asked Phil.

"No. I don't sleep too often. I might miss something."

Charlie opened his eyes and sat up. "Man," he said, "it's late."

Phil walked over to the glacier and scooped up a handful of slush. He knelt down next to Winston and gingerly placed the slush in Winston's half-open mouth.

"WHAT THE...!" Winston was on his feet, jumping around and spitting out dirty snow water. Phil clapped his hands together and giggled.

"Let's get back to our site before it gets dark," Charlie said.

We feasted that night on military rations that Phil had stolen from his older brother. I grabbed an object that resembled a Snickers bar in shape and size. It was wrapped in silver foil and bore the inscription "Turkey Dinner." I unwrapped the fleshy white bar, took a bite, and felt a full course turkey meal expand in my stomach.

"It's staggering what military technology is capable of," I said.

"You know," Phil said, "when I was a college student up in northern Minnesota, I had some roommates who were from Wisconsin. So you know what I did? I went and bought some Wisconsin cheese and every night I would go around and drop little pieces of cheese in front of their doors. Guess what? Every morning I'd look, and, would you believe it? All the cheese was gone!"

Winston frowned. "Why are you telling us this?"

Phil put his face an inch from Winston's and whispered, "I just thought you should know."

Winston gave me a confused look as Phil bounded away yelping "I'm gay! I'm gay! I'm very very very gay!" He hugged a tree.

"Randy," Winston said, cocking his head in Phil's direction, "is he...?"

"Nah, Phil's not gay. I think we could safely say that if he was, though, he probably wouldn't have much of a problem with it."

"Yes, I think we could safely say that."

Phil gradually came out of his giddiness as we settled down for a contemplative smoke around the fire. Charlie led the discussion, which was a meditation on the nomadic lifestyle.

"It could be said, with little doubt, that inertia leads to alcoholism, drug addiction, and eventually insanity. A man must continue moving, if not physically, then mentally. He must grow. He must expand his ideas, his knowledge and his awareness. To fail to do so is death."

"I think that's why I left Minnesota," Phil said. "I felt that inertia coming on. You can really feel it. Your legs and arms tighten up and you don't want to do anything. Yeah...it was definitely time to leave."

"We're sort of unusual in that way," I said. "I mean, here we have Charlie, who goes to school in Tennessee. I go to school in Georgia. I can meet Charlie and have coffee with him in Nashville, and then a month later I'm climbing mountains with him in Washington. Now I'm sitting with him, and a childhood friend from Minneapolis, and Winston, who lives in Seattle. This country is such a small place."

"Your life is just plain confusing anyway, Randy," Phil said. "Don't you have a girlfriend from New Hampshire?"

"Yeah, but she goes to school in Georgia."

"That's just way too complicated for me. I want to live in one place at a time. You live in, like, three different places at once. I was seeing a girl in Minnesota, but I had to let her go when I came out here. There was no way I was going to have a long-distance relationship. No sir!"

"One thing I've discovered about women," Charlie said, "is that they're not all they're cracked up to be."

We sat in silence for a few minutes as Charlie stoked the fire with a

branch.

"Well, I don't know about that..." I said finally.

"They're not all they're cracked up to be."

Silence.

"Hey, did I tell you guys about the Organtron?" Winston asked from across the fire.

"Organtron?"

"Yeah, it was this documentary I saw at Apple Cinemas. Apparently, around the time of WWII, some German scientist came over to the United States and built this thing called the Organtron. It was this wooden box about the size of a telephone booth that you could sit down in. You would sit down, his a red button and suddenly, you would experience the most powerful orgasm in the world...."

"Wait a minute," I said, "How did it work? Did you have to get wired up with all kinds of electrical equipment? How could you have an orgasm just from hitting a button?"

"I don't know, but you could, all right? That's how it worked. Anyway, the problem was, he was using government money to do this. Well, when the government got wind of what he was doing with their grant, they shut him down, cancelled the project. He ran off to a small town in Wisconsin and built a laboratory, continued his work. He would recruit men and women to go through all sorts of sex tests. He'd wire them up, monitor their orgasms, watch them have sex, show them porn...."

"Sounds like the UGA psychology department."

"Well, the purpose of this was so he could build even better Organtrons. At first the people in the town just knew him as the wacky old German guy, but one day some of the farmers got wind of what their wives were doing at the "clinic," and they headed over to the laboratory with shotguns. They were shocked to find a fully armed, bulletproof bunker in the middle of the woods. It had been built with the profits from the first Organtrons.

"Turns out the FBI had been tracking this guy for a while. The Organtrons had become very vogue with the literary crowd in the '50s...I think Norman Mailer had one...and the scientist was making millions. The feds wanted him for several reasons. Not only was he conducting indecent experiments with US citizens on American soil, he had also neglected to pay his taxes. So they sent a crack team of assassins to the bunker and they killed the scientist and his guards in a massive bloodbath. Man, I saw the footage of the blown-out bunker, and it was just unreal. I mean, this kind of stuff went on way before Waco, you know.

"Now there's only 200 functioning Organtrons left. The government has destroyed all the blueprints. Occasionally, Organtrons will surface at private auctions and sell them for millions of dollars. The people who were filming the documentary tracked down this middle-aged guy

who owned one. He looked really normal, just a working class guy, and he kept it in his garage. It looked like a small pine outhouse. He said it had been broken for about five years. His wife wanted him to get rid of it, but he kept it for sentimental value. At one point his kid came running up to him and said, 'Daddy, what are you doing?' and the guy said, kind of tense, 'Go back in the house, Billy, I'm just talking to the film people.'"

"Winston, you're full of shit," I said.

"No, no. I swear this is all true."

"I don't doubt that you saw the movie, but I can't believe that stuff happened."

"Well, suit yourself."

Charlie stood up. "I'm going to take a bath."

"A bath? Charlie, what are you talking about?"

"In the glacial stream."

"But it's freezing cold."

"Yes," Charlie pulled a towel out of his bag, "but I don't want to smell bad. Besides, it will be refreshing. Do you want to try it?"

"Well...."

"I'll do it," Winston said.

"Swimming!" Phil yelled.

"Randy?"

"Yeah, I guess I'll go too."

We walked down to the stream, which was more like a river littered with large rocks and debris from the mountains. Charlie was the first to go in. He walked in naked, wavering at first but gaining his balance with each step. He walked to the middle, where the water was waist level. Two waves formed around his solid torso. He flexed his muscles, sparring with the frigidity. He threw his head forward and down into the water for a brief second, then, pulling up again and leaning back, he shook the water out of his hair in sweeping arcs. He stood there for a moment, motionless, making peace with the river, then walked back out and began toweling himself, saying, "watch out for that current, it's pretty strong."

Winston and Phil went through less graceful repetitions of the same ritual. I went in last, feeling the chill climb up my ankles. Looking ahead and not down, I didn't see the slippery rock until too late. I watched in morbid fascination as the ground slipped from under me and the water swallowed me up. I felt first the sting of the water as I went under in an ice-cold baptism, then the dirt of the streambed. The current carried me, slow at first and then with building speed, away from the shouts of my friends. I realized that the water was getting deeper and it was becoming increasingly difficult to get footing. I felt the rushing, heard the rushing firing of cannons rumbling over and over. A tree hung out over the water up ahead and I threw my arms up, grasping the branch and feeling my body stretch and almost snap. The branch creaked as I pulled. The muscles in

my arms coiled and threatened to jump out of the skin. The water pulled me one way and my arms the other. Unfortunately, I was too exhausted to work myself along the branch as I had intended. I gave a long throaty howl, which was the most basic form of prayer and proclamation I knew, and let go of the branch.

The water welcomed me back like an anxious mother and I stopped struggling. I saw two large rocks approaching, and I let myself float towards them. One crunched against my shoulder. It spun me around, and I hit the next rock squarely with my back. My crumpled body drifted lazily into a small eddy surrounded by more rocks near the shore. I could feel the ground under my feet again, but I was too tired to move. I held on to one of the rocks and tried to hold on to consciousness. Up above, the lifeless sky promised peace.

"Take me," I said.

I felt my head starting to sink.

"Take me."

I was raised up, suspended. The sky opened for me. One by one the levels of existence disappeared: first the water, then the mountains, and then the earth. There was no God waiting for me and no angels in white, no deceased family members or gardens of paradise, just peace, pure and simple: peace of mind and peace of heart. Completeness. All.

My eyes opened for a half-second to see Phil's face over me. I closed my eyes and returned momentarily to Heaven, but with a nagging urgency my eyes fluttered in defiance. In between the frames of black I saw Phil, and Charlie behind him. Phil cradled me in his arms against his chest. "I thought you were gone," he said.

Phil, Charlie, and Winston carried me back. They got the fire going again and laid me down by it. As my sensations returned to me, I found that I had not broken any bones. At most I was badly bruised and winded, but Phil told me I had almost drowned.

With the burden of my pack on my back I climbed out of Heaven with my friends the next morning. We rode in my Chevy Blazer down the winding roads and out of the Cascades. In a small logging town, we stopped at a restaurant and had the most delicious earthly meal ever consumed.

The drive to Whitby Island, where Phil was living with his older brother, took two hours. It was raining when we arrived at his house.

I shook Phil's hand. "It's been years," I said, "I honestly didn't think I was going to see you again."

"It's funny how things work out," he said with a strange smile.

On the ferry back to Bainbridge Island, our home, I stretched myself out on the long, padded seat and looked over at Charlie.

"Phil's really changed since I saw him last," I said.

"For the better?"

"Yeah. Big time. When we were freshmen in high school, Phil's sister committed suicide and after that he just went downhill. He started drinking a lot, doing drugs, and kind of lost his sense of humor. Now it seems like that's all over. He's become the Phil I knew in grade school, but wiser, I guess."

"Yeah, I figured he'd been through something."

"He's a good guy," Winston said.

They say loss of innocence happens when someone has sex for the first time. That's not how it worked for me. My loss of innocence came the day Phil killed himself, not long after our hiking trip. Every morning now I wake up to the sound of a shotgun blast ringing in my ears. I often have the same dream: I'm flying low over Seattle and I can feel the rain on my face. The Seattle Space Needle juts into the sky, and dancing around the top, jumping up and down and clicking his heels, is Phil. His teeth are locked in something between a grimace and a grin. A layer of clouds has settled over the city, and there are just a few small holes where the sun can get through.

Untitled
Paula M. Cates
silver gelatin print

Dogmatic Method

Andrew Sparrow

My field lays fallow,
The factory long since abandoned,
populated only by vagrant ideas.
No longer hostilities muse,
nor privy to the virtual life
I am drifting through a construct
of my own design.

My field lays fallow,
strangled with the righteous idealogy
of a thousand men,
and the pantheons they create.
The god-head struggles for the status quo
while possibility claws at me,
leaving gaps in my words.

My field lays fallow,
once razed, the ashes lay heaped,
swirling in the wind,
plainly visible in the twilight
against the glare of commerce
and the perennial bliss of flourescents.

Feet
Michelle Woodson
silver gelatin print

Lost Love

Erica Bryant

The road ahead stretches far and wide
where am I gonna go
is there anywhere I can hide

Three hundred miles away
I continue to watch my rear view mirror
looking over my shoulder
wondering
is he near

Has he come to find that we have gone away
the children and I
the house we called home is now just an empty shell
of ghostly laughter flowing through the halls
painful memories stuck in the walls.

This wasn't how marriage was supposed to be
it wasn't supposed to end like this
everyday was to be happy
that's how it's portrayed on tv
fights, abuse, police and heartache
there is only so much my soul could take

I have to think about my life and the lives I brought into this world
my future and theirs
they don't understand why mommy's always crying
but they don't need to know that inside mommy's slowly dying

So I gathered my bags and hit the road
with no idea in the world of where I will go
but I will keep on driving until my heart tells me
"This is where you belong"

Untitled
Patrick LaPollo II
silver gelatin print

beast of burden

Erin Helmey

---

yesterday's lunch trickled
on the Cosmo as I swore
my dream would come true.
but I was happy to see
cindy's face covered
by yesterday's lunch.

the mindless clipping secured to my mirror
was a catalog girl
with blonde hair and washboard abs
to remind me of who I was and how
i wanted to be
the mindless clipping.

mother slapped my bulge,
saying suck it up,
so I did.
all confidence, esteem, and worth
were vacuumed, held in a bag
that mother slapped.

My Thinking Place
Natalie von Loewenfeldt
charcoal

Births of Dreams

Heidi Hogue

The photographer told me to relax, breath deep, have fun, pretend I had just celebrated the greatest day in my life. That's what I did, and the picture was perfect. My laugh seemed to echo on the page all the hopes and dreams I had for myself. And they did in that moment of time with my feet immersed in my favorite stream on the campus, and continued on down that stream forever.

Looking at my picture on the front of the newspaper, I realized that I could have everything I ever wanted, I just had to visualize it, and then make it happen, just like I did for the photographer. It was hard for me at first, to let loose in front of a stranger. I have actually always been soft-spoken. I wouldn't say shy, rather modest I suppose, I, Rebecca Hogue, had been chosen as USIU's Thursday girl. The university I attended was United States International University at Ashdown in England, about twenty miles from London. It was one of the best experiences of my life, and it had opened new doors for me to explore; and the thought of my picture for everyone to see unnerved me a bit. Yet, I was flattered.

This experience of my mother's, the woman whom the picture was taken for East Grisden's newspaper, has become one of my own as if I, in fact, had experienced it myself. I have the black and white picture beside my bed, and every night and morning I look at with such concentration I feel as though I have merged with it, actually become a part of it in a way.

I know my mother through and through, probably better than I know myself at times. My mother was a very intelligent, gentle person, but at the same time down-to-earth with a twist of quirkiness. She didn't try to talk above you about things that tend to bore. Instead, she came down to your level, took the time to really listen, and communicated accordingly. Her favorite movies were *Babe*, the movie about the runt pig who discovers his purpose in life, and *Toy Story*, the movie about a little boy's favorite toys, Woody and Buzz Lightyear. Every morning she ate Cocoa Puffs for breakfast, and everyday for lunch she ate a bean tostada from El Potro (just an okay Mexican restaurant, but pretty good for Savannah in her eyes). If she wasn't at work, then she was at the movie theaters with my step-dad. She had seen them all. In fact, I called her and my step-dad, Rebecca and Ernest, best movie critics of the Southeast.

No one could ever guess what she did for a living based on first impressions. Becca, as her close friends called her, was a lighthearted modest woman, but also a carefree child who took pleasure in all of life's

simple things. One of these life pleasures is what she did for six years of her life, before she passed away. My mother, Becca, was also Dr. Rebecca Hogue, OBGYN. She delivered over six hundred babies while living in Savannah, helping to bring the miracle of life to hundreds of families.

This dream of hers, to become a doctor, to help people, to make a difference in others lives, did not come to her right out of college. She first worked as a computer analyst at Custom Computers in Visalia, California, where she met my father. They married soon after, when she was only twenty-two years old. My father, Frank Hogue, was also a computer analyst, as well as the manager at Custom Computers. He was eleven years older than my mother, and had a previous marriage in which he had five children. But my mother was not afraid of this fact, so she married him and took the five children in as if they were all her own.

Life was happy and simple. Frank and Rebecca settled into a ranch-style house on a small hill overlooking lots of land with a picturesque view of California's mountains. They had two children of their own, my brother Mark and me, and a cat and a dog. It couldn't get much better.

However, Becca wanted more from life. Working on a machine was not her true calling in life, and she knew it with her whole heart. So, she investigated her possibilities and decided to go back to school for two years to get the prerequisites for medicine. Another door had been opened—She was accepted to Thomas Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

So our family of four, and the cat and dog, packed all of our belongings and moved to the other coast. We settled in a nice suburban town in Marlton, New Jersey, where my mother could commute by train to school. My teenage years were hard, like everyone else's. I was rather clumsy and introverted. I didn't have many friends, since I was the "new girl on the block." So, I stayed at home mostly with my brother and dad, since mom was busy hitting the books. Everything seemed to be fine until one day when we received a phone call that changed our lives forever. We had now hit a whirlpool in the easy stream. Daddy had cancer and a tumor in his brain.

Times got really hard then. Mom had to give dad his shots and take him to his chemotherapy treatments, while at the same time trying to maintain her grades. Grandmother came to take care of us, keeping the family together, and getting us kids off to school. Three long years passed, and my father finally died. It was a relief in a way. Suffering is one of the worst things a human being can witness. Rebecca Hogue was at a stand still in the stream of her life.

I didn't know what to do. I had two young kids who needed my help. I only had one year of school left, but it would be the hardest yet. I was letting the water take me under, and at this point, who cared? What

was it all going to mean anyway? Why had I wanted to do this in the first place? I almost gave up, I almost let myself drown in the misery of losing my love, the one who had supported my every decision. That's when I took that picture of myself out of its hideaway, and took a good look at it. Tears rolled down my cheeks and stained the black and white page that was filled with my laughter. I thought back to when my life had been so easy, and I had everything I wanted. Then I got mad, angry with myself for almost forgetting everything I had always known from that day the picture was taken. I remembered my kids, Frank, my hopes and dreams, and on I trudged.

My mother made it through the most difficult years of her life, and received her degree as a doctor. After two years of residency she had completed the eight years that it took to pursue her dream. Never once did she complain out loud about how hard it was, or how life has been so unfair. She kept her head high, she still kept laughing, and she never once gave up. My mother, Becca, became the new meaning for determination and perseverance in my eyes.

And how ironic, as I find myself standing here in the same stream of my life at twenty-three years old with all the doors open before me and one year of college remaining. My mother was killed in a car accident, but the water hasn't stopped flowing around me, hasn't taken me under. I have taken all that she has taught me, and I have continued to strive towards my dreams, with determination, persistence, and most of all the joy of living.

At twenty-three you brought me here,
At twenty-two I lost you...
Who would have thought?
Who would have knew?
At one a.m. I stare at your picture,
black and white.
You were twenty,
young and free,
clutching your hat,
laughing in the breeze,
feeling the water trickle between your toes.
It is here that you stand
frozen
in a moment of time,
until you give birth to me once again.

Reunited
Heidi Hogue
silver gelatin print

ANIME

Sasha McBrayer

Have you ever felt
Like there was someone else
Within you
Somebody no one else could see
This powerful person
On the inside of me
Screaming
Like nobody's business
To get out
To show 'em all
To knock down
All the walls
Like an anime character
So pretty,
Curvaceous,
And strong
With powers
Way beyond
Anyone else's
Imagination
There inside you
A part of you
But no one else can see
No one can see
That the person inside of me
Just might be
The real me
But I chose to keep her
Locked inside me
Cuz even if
She came busting out
Like an alien in my stomach
They'd never believe
No one would ever
Believe
That she
Was me

Obedience

Andrew Sparrow

Trained I am.
Trained to sit up or roll over,
even trained to beg
from the wealthy, like some twisted Oliver.

I am trained to adore the exhilaration of blood and sinew,
and to be absolved by an idea
while my mind's eye compares its stimulus
to the hourglass embedded there.

I am trained to accept a world where citizens serve
and nations enslave.
Trained to lay trust only in myself,
though a celebrity might make a fine substitution.

In a sea of suits, uniformed and branded,
I float listless, drifting,
looking for the shores of an undiscovered land
where dogs may roam free.

Screw You
Paula M. Cates
silver gelatin print

Subtlety

Jason Richardson

We live in a saturated society of
Fondling fingers and
Vociferating voices
That numb and quell us
Into somnambulant shoppers.

We have been impregnated by their
Ranting, radio-voices.
Infused with their haranguing headlines.
Penetrated by their thundering TVs.
We have become nothing.
We are passive, grinning, head-nodders
With information bruised bodies.

What became of subtlety?
Will we ever again
Make our own decisions?
Will we ever again want to?

Our inner voices have been
Silenced by the maniacal media
of modern minutes.

The Leaf
Melvin B. Samuel
silver gelatin print

Can A Moment Choose Depression?

Sharon K. Smith

Where in the world did you go?
And what do you have to show
for your time away?
Why wouldn't you stay,
Sane?

What was there? Who was there
to share—
the blessings that come
when you are being you,
a moment?

What happens in a moment?

It's always on time.
It comes (*clap*), it goes.

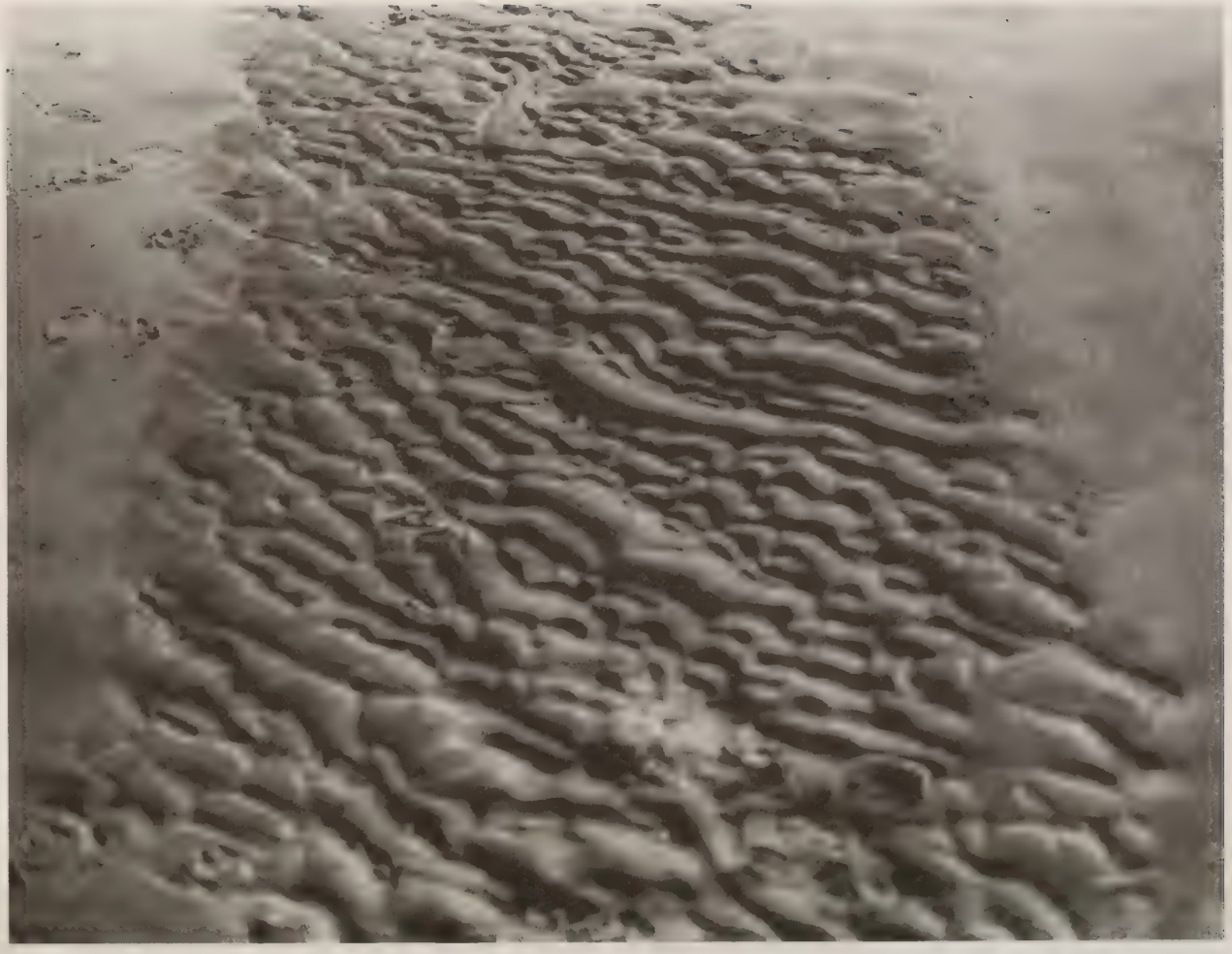
Now, if you were *that* moment,
would you still be here?
No, my dear.

Can a moment choose depression?
What if *it* never comes around?
Could you choose to frown?
feel sad?
sink?
lose?
destroy?
Give up,
Your Life?

Are you a moment?

Yes, my dear,
I Believe—
You Are.

(never choose depression)



Tybee's Thumbprint
Rekha Prakash
silver gelatin print

The Art of Breaking-In New Furniture

Rob Zanin

See, there was a difference between how things were run at my house and at Bryan's house, cause ever since I could remember, he ran the show. It was our eighth grade year, the last year in middle school, so we felt big, smart, and tough, but had enough common sense to realize that we still didn't know barely nothin about what really mattered in life. You know, getting a real job, a degree in business or medicine from mom and dad's favorite college, and eventually findin that "special someone" that you hear about in those anti-premarital sex commercials on TV. Either we didn't know nothin about all that stuff, or we were just having too much fun to care. I mean hell, both of us were looking forward to our ninth grade year, where we'd actually have *real* women in school instead of just girls. That's what his older brother told us anyhow and he was older than us, so why wouldn't it be true.

It was a Thursday afternoon in the middle of March and the snow on the grass was just beginning to melt. It was at least a good fifty degrees outside without any wind. Sorta pleasant for a change in the snowy weather, ya know? Me and Bryan had just stepped off the school bus and threw all our school stuff over on the side of the house, picked up a football and started to toss it around in what we call his "front yard." For the first time in three months, you could actually see some traces of a lighter shade of gray in the New York sky. Jeez, today it almost looked blue! All the snow on the roads was either cleared off or had melted at least two weeks ago, but I guess the plow man had a starving family of twelve to feed or somethin. He'd go up and down the suburb streets salt-salt-saltin away even when there wasn't any ice left. Some of the kids in music class said that if you rode your bike close enough to his plow truck, you could actually hear him bitch at ya from way up there in the cab. I can't say I ever found out for sure, cause I was too afraid of him runnin me over, ya know?

"I'll tell ya what kid," Bryan said with that thick Brooklyn accent that chicks from all over the world seem to love, "My Mudda ain't gonna be back at da house for anotha owa. Whaddya say me and yous get up on da roof and have us a smoke, huh?"

Neither of us would smoke by ourselves, cause that would make us addicted. Smoking with a friend just made you cool. So I agreed, just as anyone would have because Bry (only Bry to the kids he grew up with, ya know, "carriage to coffin" like he used to say) was cool. Now, I'm not just

sayin it cause I was his friend, or cause I lived
down the street. Bryan, was *cool.* If you looked cool up in the dictionary, you'd get a definition which would be somethin like "One who looks good in front of his peers, ya know?"; and then somethin like a picture of him leanin up against a lamp post, arms crossed, little smartass smile on his face at about two in the morning cause our curfew was eleven and it was cool to be out past curfew. Almost like somethin you see in those teeny trendy movies. Yeah, Bry was cool. We both wanted to go smoke a cigarette in order to feel a little older, but instead we tossed the ball back and forth seein who could peg the other one with the best spiral. The ball started to sting our hands in the cold weather, but neither of us wanted to be a sissy and put the ball down first.

"Aay, did I tell ya dat my Fadda went out da otha day and bought a tonna new fuyniture for da family room?" Bry asked.

"Naw. So I guess you got a few nice couches now huh." I replied, a little more than disappointed that my mom and dad hadn't went out and remodeled our family room. But what the hell were they supposed to do? Bry's dad ran some hot shot insurance company, and from what I could tell ran more than half the city. And well, my parents taught. You know, school. Mom and dad always told me that "teaching has it's own rewards," but never once had I seen em with a happy look on their face when the check came in. But as far as I could tell they were happy; and so was I and that was good enough for me.

Finally, Bry pegged me just a bit too hard in the right cheek with the football, and could tell that that just put an end to our game by the black and blue mark that began to appear under my right eye. I still knew that I wouldn't get off that easy with just a bruise. After all, I let the ball slip straight through my hands.

"Good hands, sissy." Bry teased, "Aay, it's da new startin wide receiva' for da Jets! Look out yous guys it's numba seventeen, wide receiva' Buttafingas!"

"S'not funny Bry. How'd you like a black eye too, huh?" I said as I threw a half speed right hook at him. He easily caught my hand, and interrupted my intentions of giving him what's what.

"Come on, kiddo, let's yous and me go inside and get some pop;" and after careful thought, he winked at me, smiled and added "Cuz ya know that I'd hafta hurcha otherwise, ya know?" I laughed sorta half assed along with him cause I think that we both knew how the fight would have turned out any ways. We went in the garage door, past the basement, and through the family room, into the kitchen. I'll tell you what though, don't think for two seconds my eyes ever left that big new expensive fluffy type couch in the family room. It was like lookin at some type of Pharaoh's throne. Just like the ones ya see in the books in history class, ya know? It had to be big enough to fit a good fifteen or twenty people, with at least

twenty-five thousand pounds of fake cotton stuffing in there too. Hell, the couch even smelled expensive. Well, I guess he saw me staring at it or somethin cuz after he threw me the can of pop, he said,

"So what's da story hea buddy? Ya gonna go check it out o' what?" And believe me, did I ever. At first I ran my hand slowly over the ocean blue stitching, and then slowly down the fluffy sides and eventually got to the mahogany back. Yeah, it was nice all right. We both spent a good five minutes sittin on it in complete silence, enjoying the way the couch sorta came to life and sucked your body into it until you and your soul became part of the upholstery. I told myself then and there that I was gonna be rich someday and have a couch just like that one; only it was gonna be filled with twenty-five thousand dollars instead of twenty thousand pounds of fake cotton stuffing. I wasn't prepared, ready for, anticipating, or expecting the next comment that he threw at me. It was out of the blue, and hit harder than the football that he hit me with in the front yard. It was almost like a message from heaven, a symbol of divine intervention proving that anything is possible, a statement of complete and utter defiance to authority, that it almost made me cover my ears…but not quite:

"So what's the deal here, kiddo?" Bry asked, "Are we gonna jump off da loft onta dis ting or what?" I slowly raised my eyes toward the upstairs and began doing the math. See, at this time, Bry was the only kid in the entire neighborhood whose old man had enough dough to have an upstairs with an open type walkway right above the family room, so you could see the people up there and vice versa, ya know? I figured that if we slid the couch about five feet toward the wall, with a good jump, we'd be set. So, we slid it up against the wall, and hurried up the stairs to get a good look at the situation. We both sat on the banister with our feet hanging down, lookin at what was probably a fifteen foot, but it had to be at least two miles from where I was. The smile on my face was gone. The feelings of defiance and triumph over mom and dad weren't there anymore, just a terrible realization that I was afraid of heights. For the first time in my life, I had obtained some knowledge of the fact that I wasn't invincible and two feet to the left, or two feet to the right, really made a difference. But see, the whole problem was that I was too cool to get down and do what I knew was safe. Don't think for a minute that I wasn't gonna let him jump though, cause no matter if it was a hit or miss, it was a good laugh for me. Maybe two feet to the right or left would serve him right for peggin me with the football…but I didn't tell Bry that.

"So what's da story, sissy? Do I gotsta do everyting foist?" Bry said, and with a little smile, he pushed off and landed on the couch with a soft "Thumpt!" Now, I knew that there was no way I was getting out of it without jumping off. After all, he first and called me a sissy. I had to go. Why? I don't know for sure, but I knew that it would make me cool if I did. So, I closed my eyes and pushed. As I fell through the air, I'm still not

sure how long I was between the upstairs and downstairs, but it felt like time had ceased to exist. Then, I realized that my jump had not made the same noise as Bry's. Mine sorta sounded similar to splintering, maybe crackling, but definitely broken wood, and nothin like the "thumpt" created by twenty thousand pounds of fake cotton stuffing.

"Holy shit! Ya broke the friggin couch!" Bry yelled with his accent thicker than I ever remember it. For the first time in my life, I could tell that he wasn't in control. I opened my eyes, stood up and walked across the room to the opposite wall. I turned around slowly, almost expecting to see a firing squad taking aim at my head, and might have rather seen five men with guns instead of that expensive couch lying pitifully in a V shape. The underside beam was certainly broken, and that expensive couch was certainly heading for the city dump. And I could tell we were both certainly headed straight for our rooms the rest of the winter as soon as mom and dad found out. I looked at Bry for some sign of hope, some clever, devious plan in order to make things better, but all I gots back was a blank stare that said "I'm screwed." Well, at least that's how I took it. So, quickly and silently, I grabbed my backpack and put my shoes on and started to walk home.

By now it was gettin dark and the semi-blue sky was now covered up by clouds any ways. The only noise on the street was that salt crazy nut in the plow goin up and down the road, putting salt on more salt that was there since last week. I had definitely gotten colder outside too, probably about forty degrees now, and Jeez it was only six-thirty and the sun had already gone down. I realized at that moment that this was the start of the rest of my life. It was as though the couch seemed to collapse under the weight of my childhood ignorance and for the first time I realized that danger was a real thing, and that some actions did have consequences. I put down my backpack, turned and looked back at Bryan's house. I could have almost cracked a smile at the thought of that couch breaking if his dad didn't pull up in the driveway at the same time.

"Kid, I hope ya got a damn good excuse this time," I said under my breath to no one in particular. I turned again, and pulled the pack of cigarettes from my jacked pocket. "three-fifty of my allowance for this?" I thought as I lit one by myself for the first time. I glanced one more time back at Bry's, picked up my backpack, and headed home to see what was for dinner.

Untitled
Kellie Easterling
polaroid transfer

Untitled
Robert McCorkle
acrylic on canvas

Theory of Flight
Jennifer Cohen
acrylic on canvas

Under the Pier
Kathy Hutcherson
silver gelatin print, sepia tone

Inevitable

Adrian Godbee

The sun rises in your eyes…
all things living come from your touch.
Awakening;
learning;
caring;
loving;
all senses and emotions arise at your command.
In the palm of your hand
sets my soul in a cage,
waiting for me to find the key
(to your heart).
I pray that the sun never sets in azure eyes or
skies,
and that our love rules this world of light.
For if the sun sets
(in your eyes)
And the moon rises
(in its full illuminating glory),
I will cover my heart with that blanket
that lies at the dark edge of the world,
and wait for the sun to rise
again.

Untitled
Keemba Davis
silver gelatin print

Electric Eyes
Pia Kokko
silver gelatin print

Dear Mr. Whitman:

Adrian Godbee

I, too, hear America singing -
But now her song isn't quite as sweet.
Bloody cries come from the streets
Where Red was shed.
Unborn babes lie in unmarked graves,
With their future eliminated.
Firewords spread around the sphere -
My Brothers and Sisters take one last
Breath of living air.
The elderly lay forgotten,
While democracy hangs a flashing, neon
"Closed" sign,
Waiting on St. Paul's gates to open.

Listen!
Slowly,
America's singing will
Die...
With her past,
her present,
her future,
if we only stand to listen...
to her last...lingering...notes.....

Untitled
Rekha Prakash
silver gelatin print

sanctuary

Gregory Vaughn

When detached reflecting on my beloved
I oftentimes become frightened
that I am not loved the same,
but the memory of her gentleness
is enough to pacify my yearning soul.
I study the moment my eyes discovered hers
stealing glances playfully,
but with serious intent.
But yesterday has passed to what seems an endless time ago.
her frame, her eyes, her smell...
All encompass my grasp with the closure of my eyes,
a treasured memory that no one can steal.
She is my sun on a cool summer morning:
The light of her tenderness descending on my face,
warming me all over.
So distant, yet near in my heart
borrowed words echo in my mind,
whispering the song of love.
Words beautiful, and yet menacing
like a scalpel cutting deep, prone to her mercy
my devotion has no limits.
Will she come to me and ease my mind?
Desperate moments clench my soul in times of doubt.
And I grieve in silence,
as my fondness for her multiplies.
She is my essence
therefore I have no alternative except to love her.
My world has been infiltrated by the presence of a woman
in every sense of the word.
So sensuous and magnificent,
that I am overwhelmed.

Union
Mike Rios
charcoal

Mirrored Results

Erin Helmey

Beth's hand quivered as she handed the petite girl her paper. It was probably stress, she thought, but she had taken that diet pill this morning. They always made her stomach a little queezy, but then she could at least feel it working, like her round belly was shrinking already from one little pill. She didn't mind though because the nausea kept her from eating.

That morning, she taped a picture of this girl from a catalog on her mirror. She was beautiful yet casual in these little pink sweatshorts that dipped below her waist with this sweatshirt that was cropped, so Beth could see her flat tummy with that perfect little naval. Beth thought that if she saw her every time she looked in the mirror, it would remind her to stay focused on her goal.

She was hurrying to get out of work, so she would make her doctor's appointment that day. The dreaded physical always plagued her with sweaty palms; it just wasn't a comfortable situation for any party involved.

She pulled up to the office and stepped out of the car; her belly rubbed across the steering wheel as she exited. She approached the automatic doors and thought how much she hated those things; they seemed to magnify her laziness and bring it to her attention as if she couldn't push or pull a door. She signed her name under the list of previously highlighted names; her hand was still wavering, magnified by the pen with the metal chain attached, clanking on the cold, steel clip of the clipboard. She knew she would be next, so it wouldn't be long now. Beth sat in the cushy chair that hugged her already well-padded thighs and watched the fish in the huge tank. Each one kept about its business, not paying the least attention to the other. There was a big one that just hovered over the rest; carefree at the top of the water, he seemed to possess this air of superiority. He was grey, not blue or yellow like the others, just grey and huge in comparison. The fins on his side seemed so tiny against his bulging midsection. "Jones." That was her and what she called her obscure, indistinct, Doe-like name.

The young nurse guided Beth to the first step: the dreaded scale. The harsh, metal contraption seemed to constantly point up before the nurse finally settled on a weight of 235 while the number reverberated through Beth's consciousness. Another reminder of her failure as an American woman served as a push toward her dream.

It was finally over, she thought to herself while backing out of her parking space. Beth hadn't eaten since the night before, thanks to the trusty, yellow pill, so she decided to grab something quick. Pulling up at

the drive-thru, Beth told herself to order the salad but out slipped the number five whose fat content was already accumulating on her lower stomach. Once again, after devouring fries and all, the guilt of another meal hung heavy on every appendage that was larger than the catalog girl's.

After arriving at home, Beth loaded her arms with mail and entered the frigid, dark house. She dropped the mail on the kitchen table immediately and headed toward the bathroom. The walls were papered with a delicate blue and pink, flowery pattern, contrasting Beth's view of herself in the mirror. She stared at herself while letting past comments flow through her mind. She could still hear that guy saying, "You have such a beautiful face if only…."

If only, she thought—if only what? She preached to herself that it was what people didn't say that mattered, and what he didn't say was that her body was ugly. Her mousy brown hair curled around her creamy cheeks, dropping below her developing double chin. Her hazel eyes, barely open, scanned the contents of the mirror, seeing only dimples covering her touching thighs and stretch marks extending from her naval southward and surrounding her breasts like fingers stealing her femininity. Her vibrating hand slowly lifted the toothbrush and prodded her throat as she hovered over the toilet. Her stomach turned every time contact was made with the torn tissues of her throat. It was only a matter of time, and the number five would join the rest of the house's waste, taking with it Beth's pride and esteem. With every nudge of the brush, her stomach turned over atop itself; her mouth began to water in anticipation for the partially digested meal. Then, up it came, defying all laws of gravity and biology, for Beth had taken the law into her own hands, determined to become one of the many, who needn't struggle for acceptance and prosperity in the world of gender relations.

She stared at herself in the mirror, as she always did after that moment when she felt she had some inkling of success, leaving the remnants of the number five scattered about on the crisply white bowl, seat, and creamy, cold ceramic tile. Her cheeks were flushed with a rosy color from the blood that rushed to her head; tears had welled in her eyes, slowly drifting down her strained face, and she saw that once again she had ruptured a blood vessel in her eye from straining to remove from her body that destroyer of quality life. The blood-red appearance in her left eye grew until it had taken over almost the entire inner corner. "Like a demon," she muttered, entranced by her own reflection, disgusted just the same. Her focus became lost in the rapture of the churning blood, for she saw nothing but red, blood red. The welding of her conscious meditations and her inextricable subconscious boiled and assaulted her visual reality. The blood dripped from her eye and overflowed down her full cheeks, now a darker red from blood that flowed outside of her body. It ran down her chins and

across her neck, forming separate streams that seemed to be sharp, glacial fingers grasping at her throat, raw from the regurgitation and scratching fingers. As her lethargic focus shifted to the covetous fingers, Beth became dizzy from the fear arising in her gut at the face of a demon cultivated. Her fall was slow as if drifting on the pillowy air, but the softness came to an abrupt end as her as regret-filled head received a blow from the ceramic bowl. Encircled in the remnants of lunch and blood, Beth remained, a victim of her own illusory ideas of superiority and perfection.

Untitled
Elizabeth Pferschy
silver gelatin print

An Answer to Death

Heidi Hogue

Thoughts scuttling with the wind
in whirlwinds of feelingless confusions.
Where are you…
Where am I?
Is this real?
Or a façade of the mind,
Like the water in a desert,
Thirsty and setting out to quench,
yet coming to taste the dry, gritty sand that gets caught in the corners of your eyes.
You're still not here.
I'm still here,
Fighting off crazy and lonely tears,
Staring into the looking glass
only to see hazy notions of what might be a reunion.
Tornadoes of emotions—
Love, Anger, Sadness, Despair—
rip throughout my numb body (which really means nothing anyway).
Take the mirror, spin it around, and stare deep into the depths beyond the gates,
in the pupil, that certain Twinkle in the eye…
It's very clear, you shall not miss it…
The Soul.
Dive deep and dare to explore,
and you will find the effervescent pearl shining within its shell.
Souls never leave.
They are interconnected, like enigmatic puzzle pieces fixed in circles of eternity.
Finally I am put to rest.

Untitled
Rachael Dubberly
silver gelatin print

Searching

Adrian Godbee

I close my eyes
  soft breezes blow
  picks up my hair
I search for your caress
  I yearn for your soul to touch mine
A scent from my memory
  I turn, but you aren't there
I feel your touch
  it leaves me shivering,
 quivering slightly,
Like the cool night air that
  caresses me
  as we count stars in the sky
I'm staring at a horizon
  searching for your silhouette
  against a sunrise
by a lakeside
I return to the cabin
  leaving the night air as it
  kisses me goodbye
I open my eyes
  and find you at last
lying beside me

Untitled
Elizabeth Pferschy
silver gelatin print

Untitled
Sandra Gupta
silver gelatin print

Quiet River

Richard DiPirro

The air was still the day he crossed the flowing border of the town. The air was still and the sun leaned on this side of the river as his hiking boots rang the dull timbers of the bridge. The gnats and mosquitoes held their convention along the length of the river and shore, and they swarmed a halo around the stranger, but, I declare, not a one touched down on his dusty ballcap, nor lay tiny feet upon the sweat of the man's face. He came with company that day; a dog the color of dried clay trotted at his side, looking neither right nor left, and moving as a dog would move had it walked a hundred miles in a handful of days.

At the end of the bridge, man and dog hopped down to the river's bank, forsaking the road's itinerary for one of their own. The man walked to the water's edge and squatted so that he leaned out over the soft-running surface. He stayed that way for a while, occasionally stretching out one arm and gracefully dipping his hand in the cool water. The dog drank its fill and lay down in the shade of an old elm. The dog neither panted nor drooled much, as one might expect a dog to do on a day as warm and as humid as this was. It appeared either too exhausted to behave as a normal dog, or it was impervious to the heat and the multitude of insect communities, which loved this land like no other. After a while the man stood and began walking down-stream, toward me. He gave a soft whistle and the dog appeared instantly at his side.

The man hiked along the river path with long strides and he approached me rapidly. He wore tired jeans and an olive-green, military-style rucksack. His T-shirt was faded and soiled and his cap was rife with road-dust and sweat stains. I sat upon my favorite fallen live-oak, with my pole out above the shining river and the blue-tinted line running as slack as ever into an arbitrary point in the water's surface.

I shifted myself slightly as I sat so I might view the stranger's face as he drew near. I nodded my head and raised my hand in greeting. "Nice dog," I said to him. He slowed his pace and nodded in return. He stopped and looked at me once. His hair and his face were darker than his arms, and the shade, which fell on the man's face from his ballcap, mixed with the road-tan,

dirt and beard stubble so as to erase any prominent features from view. His eyes, however, flashed into view as he first looked me over. They were a deep, forest green; a green which grows where rain falls more often than not.

He looked down at the dog, as though he had never seen it before. "You think so?"

His gaze moved on to where my line lay dead in the water.

"Sure! She's a Lab, isn't she?" The dog was sitting patiently by the man's side looking straight ahead, down the path. As I watched, she turned and looked at me, the sun falling full on her face and bringing out a beautiful metallic rust color. Her face was rather small, but her eyes were huge—a big, strong brown. She looked at me unblinking for as long as I looked at her. The gnats swarmed all over me, as they always did, regardless of the amount of bug-spray I used, but the dog didn't flinch. She didn't scratch or pant, she just looked at me.

At last, the young man hitched his pack up a bit, touched his cap in my direction and began to move on down the path again. "Good luck," he said as he walked away. I heard him give the same soft whistle as earlier, and the dog trotted off to be at his side.

"Good luck to you, Sir," I called after him, and turned back to my slumbering line.

I sat on my log for a while longer, until I had to admit to myself that the fish were not at home today. I strolled home leisurely, enjoying the bright sun on my face. I put away my rod and tackle, and packed today's earthworm survivors back in their corner of my ice-box. I was starving and, as I had no fish to eat for lunch this afternoon, I decided to walk into town and get something at the cafe.

There weren't many people on the street as I walked through the center of town. It was hot enough to keep everyone behind their fans and their air-conditioning. As I approached Whitaker Cafe down State Street, I could see the young stranger's dusty dog sitting on the porch of the cafe. It was the same dog I had met that morning, and as I mounted the steps to the cafe, I reached my hand out to pat her head. She didn't make a sound, didn't even raise her nose from where it lay on her paws, but she looked into my eyes again, and her look was enough to freeze my hand in mid-pet. This dog did not want to be touched.

I opened the door to the cafe and walked into thick,

refreshing, cool air. The bell jingled as I closed the door, and I took my usual seat right inside, at the counter. I could see the young traveler at the far end of the counter, drinking a cup of coffee and staring into his saucer. George Whitaker gave me a nod from behind the counter and set a huge, cold glass of his home-brewed iced-tea in front of me. "How's fishin', Earl?" He asked me.

"Not a nibble, Whit. Not a nibble." He was standing in front of me, at the very end of the lunch-counter. As I watched him work, he kept leaning back and looking out the front window. From where I sat, I could see he was looking at the dog on his porch. I ordered a ham sandwich, because I was mad at fish. As I ate, I couldn't help but watch my old friend's strange behavior. He would work a bit, cooking or cleaning something, then return to his position in front of me and lean back so he could look at the dog. I noticed that he didn't pay the stranger much mind at all, but the dog had piqued his interest. And every time he looked out the window, his brow became a bit more knotted. Finally, I couldn't stand it any more. "Whit, what the hell is the matter with you?"

He looked at me, shook his head a bit, leaned back, looked outside and shook his head some more. He stared at me for a time without saying anything, just shaking his head slowly. "Earl," he started, "we been friends a long time, yeah?"

"Longer'n I care to admit, sure." I sipped my tea.

"And you know I'm no crazier'n anyone else here. We go to the same church...went to the same school...."

"Sure, Whit. What's going on?"

"Well." He started to lean back again, stopped himself, and looked at the floor. "Earl, it's that goddamn dog!" He looked deep into my eyes, gauging my reaction.

I had no idea what was making him so agitated. He started pacing back and forth in front of me. "What in God's name are you going on about?" I asked him.

"Don't you recognize that dog, you old fart?" His voice was rising, quivering, and we both turned and looked at the stranger down at the far end of the counter, but he just sipped his coffee and stared straight out in front of him, at nothing. I leaned over and looked out the window myself. The dog lay as it had when I first came in, with her nose on her front paws. As I watched, not once did her legs kick, nor her ears twitch. She didn't shift or groan or move the slightest bit. But she was not familiar.

"I don't, actually. I still don't know what you're babbling about, Whit." He rolled his eyes and threw his arms up in exasperation. He checked the stranger again with a dramatic sidelong glance and leaned over to whisper in my ear.

"It's the Taylor dog!" He hissed.

I stopped chewing my sandwich and tried to remember who he was talking about. "Whit, the only Taylors I know of around here was Lee Taylor and his family, but ... well...." Now my brow was knitted up and I leaned clear across the counter and looked outside. "Now come on, Whit!"

He was nodding his head at me. "I'm tellin ya'! I know it, Earl. I been chewing it over and over for thirty minutes before you come in here, and I'm telling ya', it is the goddamn Taylor dog!"

"But...." As I tried to understand what I was being told, the stranger stood up from his stool. He pulled a few, rumpled dollars from his pocket and threw them on the counter, picked his rucksack up from where it lay on the floor at his feet, and clumped his way past us toward the door.

"Thank ya', now," Whit called after him. The young stranger nodded at us and jingled his way outside. On the porch we saw him hitch his pack up on his back and make his way south on State Street, back toward the river. I couldn't hear the soft whistle from inside, but the dog hopped up and trotted off, close to the man's left leg.

A few other customers came and went and George Whitaker fed them and watered them and thanked them now. Finally we were alone and he turned the 'Open' sign over to read 'Closed.' He walked up to the counter and sat on the stool beside me. "Well?" He asked.

"Whit, you know as well as I do that Lee Taylor and his family died in that hurricane, what was it? Fifteen...twenty years ago?"

"Twenty, Earl. Twenty years ago. This month!"

"And the dog, Whit. The dog drowned with the rest of them. Drowned saving the little boy, as I recall. What was the boy's name?"

"Lance. His name was Lance Taylor. But do you remember where they got the dog from?" I was beginning to think that my friend had taken to drinking early, or, God forbid, he was beginning to get a bit loopy.

"Whit, this is nonsense. Of course I can't remember that far back, and neither can you!"

"I can, because I gave that pup to Lee Taylor when the

boy was born! Earl, that dog came from the same litter as Petey!" For a little over fifteen years Old Pete had been a fixture at Cafe Whitaker, lying inside or on the porch, greeting regulars and sponging affection from locals and passers-through alike. Old Pete had practically been the town mascot.

"Damnit, Whit, Pete's been dead ten years now. That dog isn't even middle-aged yet." I thought of the Taylors, and their dog. It had been a female, I remembered now. And it was one of the smaller dogs from that litter. I'd only seen her occasionally, with the boy as he grew older. Always with the boy. And the color....

"Come on! You done with that sandwich yet?" I looked at my plate. I hadn't eaten half of it, but I wasn't hungry anymore.

"I guess...."

Whit stood up and grabbed my arm. "Come on!" The bell jingled after us and we headed south on State Street.

We walked in silence to the end of State street and took a left on Huntington. George Whitaker walked determinedly. His chin was out and his fists were clenched. I was not as determined, and I had to push myself to keep up with him. I was confused. The color of the dog.... Pete had been a deep chocolate color from head to toe. His fur had been short, with a glossy sheen. And he had been big for a Lab. The stranger's dog, on the other hand, was much smaller, even for a female. And her coat was lighter, with that brilliant rust color brought out by the sunlight. This dog was much different from Old Pete. And the characteristics that made the stranger's dog so different from Pete were the same ones that had differentiated the Taylor boy's dog from a young Pete.

"No, Whit. It's impossible. We're just remembering that dog in the form of the one we saw today. This is ridiculous." We both turned down McCabe Lane at the same time, drawn to the same place. It was a narrow gravel drive, which ran a few hundred yards back from the river, all the way to the next county.

"Impossible...ridiculous...I'm telling you, Earl, I know what I'm talking about." He stopped walking and turned to look me in the face. "I have it on tape! I have that goddamned dog on tape!" He spun around and stormed off up the lane. We passed a few drives leading off to some newer houses and properties along the river.

The river had just about wiped out the entire town twenty years ago. A hurricane had come early that year, a bad one. It

had crushed the coastal towns and careened inland, pushing more water up the river in one twenty-four hour period than the river would normally see in six months. The rain had barely even begun and the river flooded its banks. It rose ten feet in the first two hours and then the wind got really nasty. The trees, which had sheltered our families and properties for generations, began tearing the town apart. The Whitakers' roof had been ripped away by the wind, and Whit's five-year old son had been crushed by a falling bookshelf. That was but one example, and others had it worse than Whit. The Taylors had it worse.

We were nearing the Taylor's property now. Their house had stood close to the river, elevated on old wooden pilings. Lee Taylor's grandfather had built the house, and he built it strong, but the strength of the winds and the mad gluttony of the river were the highest in recorded history on that horrible day, twenty years past. The Taylor house was rent asunder and sent careening down the furious river in pieces. And the entire family, save young Lance, was consumed by the cool water.

More than fifty people in our small town alone died in that storm. The circumstances which made the Taylors' sad fate so memorable were merely a matter of coincidence. There was a young journalism student visiting that summer, doing a school project about small towns like ours. He rented a room above the cafe, from George Whitaker, for a month or so. On the day of the storm, he had been out hiking on the far side of the river. He had a movie camera with him, and he was filming the river and the thick woods on the far bank. When the storm sprang up, and the water suddenly rose around him, he realized what was happening and he panicked. He floundered toward a small, unoccupied fishing boat that came speeding by, and managed to somehow jump inside, thinking he could make it quickly across the growing river. Instead, he was hurtled downstream, and at the second bend after the bridge, the boat crashed into a growing log-jam and was stuck there, still on the far side of the river, for the remainder of the storm.

The young student looked everywhere for some kind of help and, as he looked across the river from where he was stuck, he could see the Taylor's house come apart. And he had raised the camera to his eye and he had gotten all of it. He and the young Taylor boy had eventually been rescued, and the student's tape had been shown nationally. The student had gone on to become famous at some big-city newspaper, or television station, and Lance Taylor had been sent wherever they send young boys

who are orphaned under traumatic circumstances.

Whit and I stepped off of McCabe Lane and slowly entered the clearing where the Taylor house had stood. "See that!" Whit whispered. The stranger squatted at the edge of the water, much as he had when I first saw him, leaning out over the quiet river, dipping his hand now and again. The dog lay in the shade of an old tree, neither panting nor drooling, just watching the glassy flow of the water. Whit and I bent down a bit behind the long grass and brush that owned this property. "You see, Earl," Whit was tugging on my sleeve, "It's that damn Taylor kid!"

"Shhh!" As we watched, the young man stood and turned around. He scanned the property back and forth. I was convinced he had heard Whit's big mouth and was trying to locate us, but I was wrong. The man's gaze stopped toward the middle of the property and he walked to the spot he had found, stooped down and stood up with a brilliant purple wildflower in his hand. He walked again to the edge of the quiet river and tossed in the flower. From where we were crouched we could see the sun light up the spot where it landed. Purple spun around twice, hesitated, and then accelerated downstream. The man stood and watched the flower go, then whistled softly and man and dog set off downstream after it.

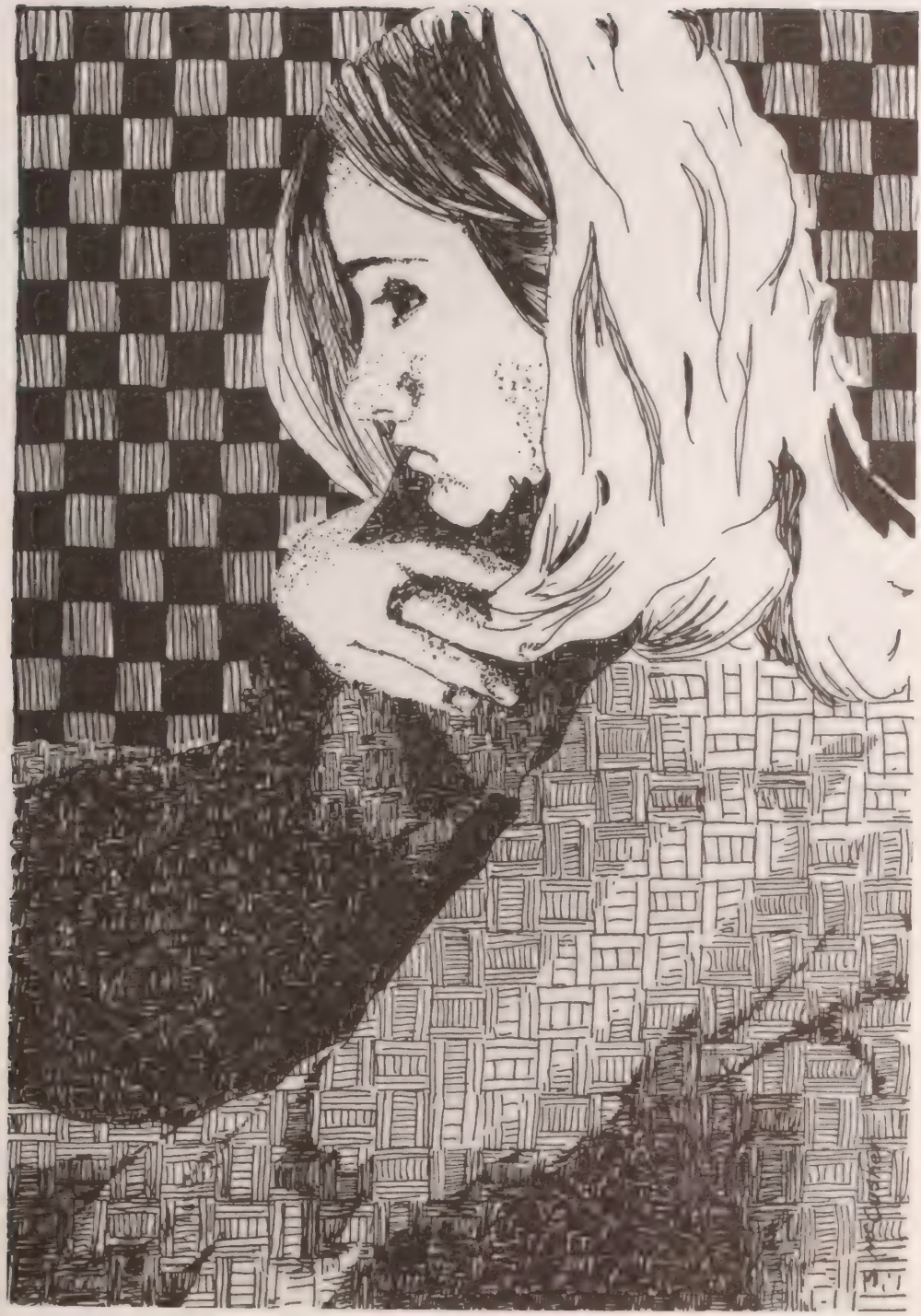
We waited until they were gone and we walked down to the river ourselves, past the stumps of ruined pilings. At the water's edge, I squatted as he had squatted and gracefully dipped my hand in the ever-moving surface. The water was cool, but not cold, and the current pulled my hand as if encouraging me downstream.

The projector rattled and chattered as it spun its tragic tale. Smoke from Whit's cigarette drifted up through the black and white images cast on the far wall of the room. We both drank greedily from our cold cans of beer. First a jumble of snow and blank frames of film, then, suddenly, a clear image of the Taylor place through beating sheets of rain. The river was brown and angry, and the water was up behind the Taylor property, inundating everything up to McCabe Lane. The house leaned to the right, slowly at first. As we watched, the pilings gave way one at a time, and the house began to break up. Someone, Mrs. Taylor I assume, fell from an upstairs window and was swept away. The house lost all recognizable form as pieces large and small were carried downstream. Then the camera focused

on a form clinging to the base of one of the pilings. It was Lee Taylor, holding onto what was left of the piling with one arm. With his other he held onto his youngest daughter. The poor girl was buffeted and flung about by the current until finally, she was snatched from the elder Taylor's grasp. He screamed once, I could almost hear it, even without sound, and then let go the piling, to be with his family. As the last vestiges of the family known as Taylor were carried away, a small head broke the surface of the water. It was young Lance Taylor, and as he floundered and choked and was grabbed by the water, the dog could be seen swimming from the direction of McCabe Lane and dry land. As we watched, the dog grabbed the collar of the Taylor boy's shirt and began paddling toward shore. Whit and I both leaned closer to the image we were watching. Remarkably, even through the rain and the spray from the river, one could see the pair, boy and dog, clearly, if only for a moment. It was the boy's dog, Pete's sister, the same dog we had seen this day. We saw them for a moment, then they were gone from the camera's view, and the film was over.

Whit turned off the projector, and flipped on the lights. He looked at me as I took a long swig of my beer. "The boy lived, as I suppose you know. But I saw the body of that damn dog myself. She drowned saving that kid!" I just looked at my beer and nodded my head. Whit sat down again next to me. "Goddamn spawn of Satan, what we saw today."

"I don't know, my friend," I said. "Seems more like an angel to me." Whit snorted and went to fetch some more beer.



Untitled
Sharon McCusker
pen and ink

Gone

Kimberly Porter

As I watch the flicker of the flame
my mind begins to wander.
I begin to wander off as if in a daze.
I can remember your face,
but only now while my mind
is at a repetitive pace.

I know not where I have traveled
but I have been here before,
I know it, I feel the glow of my soul
I can remember your face.
There is a peace of sweet nothing.
That is always known.

I feel no physical presence
only the energy of myself.
No longer existing as I
know it…still
I remember your face.
No longer are
you here in this earthly domain
but no, you are not gone.

Untitled
Jay Solomon
silver gelatin print

For Want of Slumber

Mike Rios

Everything happened quickly that morning, after Billy swallowed the sleeping pills. At first he had feared nothing would happen as he lay down on his bed and closed his eyes. He hadn't been tired in the least, even after a restless night of contemplation. In fact, he had risen from his bed with an unexpected vigor, which had propelled him on the quarter of a mile walk to the drugstore where the plainfaced clerk had rung up the four boxes of Dozeallnite without so much as a blink. He was surprised at how much energy he had. It seemed to him that he had lacked any sort of energy for a long time. And now that he didn't need it he had an abundance of it. But despite this energy Billy felt calm, extremely calm.

Only a few minutes had passed away when he felt a sting on his toe. It was more like a pinprick, and he hadn't thought much of it until he felt another. And then suddenly all his toes and the soles of his feet were being pricked here and there, culminating in a haphazard tingling. The sensation spread quickly, rising up his calves like an army of charging ants. He sat up and started to rub his legs when he felt a tiny wave of pricks on his fingers. His hands started shaking as this wave, too, began spreading along his palms and across his wrists.

He threw himself back down upon the bed and tried to lie still, realizing at once what was happening. He tried to say it in his mind, to sound out the words in his thoughts. *I'm.... I'm....* He couldn't complete the sentence although he knew that he had to have thought it already. Why else would he be struggling to say it if he hadn't already thought it? *Is this how it feels to*...? he asked no one in particular. *A thousand, two thousand needles*?

What will they think when they find me? He opened his eyes and looked around his room. The eighteen by twelve foot space, which had been his world for these past few months, was decorated with empty liquor bottles (from when he had a job), empty beer bottles (from the time after he walked out of his job, never to return to it or any other), dirty laundry (including the only three shirts he owned and one he had stolen), and crushed cigarette boxes (piled in a corner by the pornographic videos). Missing from the room's decorations was a non-existent note penned by a man who wished to no longer exist. *Why leave a note*? he had asked himself. *The body'll explain it all, won't it*? *Won't it*? But the real reason he hadn't written a note was not that he had felt it unnecessary. He couldn't find something to write the note with and lacking the energy to look for a pen or pencil or marker or crayon or...he had simply given up, like he had

on the playground when climbing the jungle gym had become too difficult, like he had in college when writing papers had become too difficult, like he had in the desert when carrying a bleeding soldier, a bleeding man, a bleeding friend, had become too difficult. *Am I giving up again? Do I ignore this energy inside of me telling me to get my ass up? I thought you didn't want to get up anymore? I thought… you thought… I thought….*

He jumped off the bed and ran into the living room where his roommate was arguing with her boyfriend again. "Elizabeth," he managed to say, "I think I need a ride to the hospital."

The next moment he was standing at the entrance to the emergency room at St. Mark's closing the passenger door of a blue pickup truck. From inside, Elizabeth's boyfriend wished him well while revving the engine. Billy watched him shoot across the parking lot before he could offer his thanks.

It didn't take long for the doctors to see him. They were upon him as soon as he told the receptionist what he had done. He gave them his name and address and social security number and, in turn, they held his arms (which were violently shaking), forced him to swallow the thickest, blackest liquid he had ever seen, and stuck a long tube down his throat. One of the doctors said, "All right, now," and Billy watched as the globbish contents of his stomach rushed through the tube, exiting into an unseen container with a continuous plop, plop. This made him vomit some more until there was nothing remaining in his stomach but the tube. They extracted that with one pull while he let out a long breath. Then they connected him to an intravenous unit and a monitor, and left.

He lay there alone for what he thought were hours, trying to regain a sense of calm, a difficult task given the needle lodged in his arm and the monitor directly facing him like a possessed television he could not turn off. He told himself, however, that the needle was an obvious necessity, that his body surely needed the basic nourishment the intravenous unit was dispensing drop by drop. And the monitor? Another necessity. But why did it have to face him? Perhaps one of the doctors thought it would do the kid some good to watch his heart-rate and blood pressure bounce along a screen for a while. Maybe the kid'll think twice next time.

"Right in there," he heard a woman's voice say.

"Thank you." Another voice, this one familiar.

He turned towards the door and saw Elizabeth walk in. She sat next to the bed and asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Scared," he admitted.

"I can imagine," she said, looking at him with what he first thought to be pity. But there was something else in her eyes, something he had seen somewhere before.

"I see they gave you charcoal."

He just stared at her.

"The black stuff you swallowed. You have some on your lips." She smiled at this.

"Oh," he said like five year-old, wiping his mouth. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting any visitors."

She leaned forward and delicately wiped a finger on the edge of his bottom lip. "Missed some."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Neither spoke for a few seconds. When one of them did it was Billy.

"How'd you know it was charcoal?"

"That's what they gave me."

"Oh," he said, embarrassed again.

"I accidentally drank some anti-freeze once. I know, you're wondering 'How do you drink anti-freeze by accident?' Well, when you have a boyfriend stupid enough to keep it in a bottle of Gatorade in the cab of his truck and you're driving along one day and you get thirsty, it's pretty easy."

He laughed. He couldn't help doing so. But before he could apologize Elizabeth started laughing, too.

"I have to admit, I can laugh about it now, but when they were putting that tube in my mouth I was terrified. I thought I was going to…."

He silently nodded.

"I, uh, I don't know what I'm doing here. I mean, when Brandon came back and I asked him how you were and he said he just dropped you off I was mad. I was furious. I told him we should come see you and he said, 'Why?' I said 'He's my roommate, that's why.' Jesus, what kind of question is that? Some things you just do. You shouldn't have to explain, you know?"

Billy realized what he saw in her eyes. It almost flattened him.

She stood as if to leave. "I've got to get to work. Besides, you need your rest."

He took her hand in his, surprised by the amount of energy it took to do so. His lips parted to ask her to…. He couldn't, he had no right to. Instead he freed her hand and watched her leave the room, all the while listening to the sound of her footsteps fade slowly until it was consumed by the droning hum of the air conditioner. He closed his eyes once again that morning and he didn't open them until later that evening when the sound of footsteps returned, awakening him from something more than his sleep.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

Broken Down
Paula M. Cates
silver gelatin print

REM

Erica Bryant

Every waking moment
I think about your beautiful brown eyes
golden brown complexion
the holes that appear in your face when you smile.

Every waking moment
I feel your soft hands caressing my back, my thighs, my breast
taking me to that special place in ecstasy that only your touch can.

Every waking moment
I smell your sensual aroma "Ralph Lauren Safari"
like an African mezzanine
my body waits for your to explore its genuine beauty.

Every waking moment
I call your name
you come to me
I hold you in my arms and tell you how much I love you
and you speak the words of love back to me
then you fade away
suddenly I realize
my every waking moment with you
is in my dreams.

Untitled
Sandra Sumner
silver gelatin print

Scattered Showers

Seth Riley

Maybe they're right. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to talk about it. I tumble the story, of that day I mean, around in my head day in and day out. Like laundry spinning around my mind all the time and I still don't know that I'll be able to describe it. When I'm just thinking, the pieces can just float where they will. You follow? Anyway, I'll give you your logical progression, if you think it'll get us anywhere.

I still think about her every day, thoughout of all of the years that we were together, it's the last day that I can't forget. I've found that my memories of her before that day have dulled, but the memory of her that Wednesday is blazed, if you will, into my mind. Six years have passed, but with every day that goes by, I feel like I've moved back closer to it. Almost funny, I think, how the day started out as if it would replicate the stream of Wednesdays that came before it.

Wednesdays. They've always particularly frustrating for me, so you'll have to excuse me if I get carried away. So, here we begin. Wednesday morning. Six forty-five, alarm howling, I roll onto my side and scowl at the oversized red numbers. Around six fifty-three I can't take the buzzing anymore and step out of bed. So begins another day.

Pants go on, left leg first. Slipping into the black dress shoes that still carry the veneer of their spit shine from the night before, I can smell the coffee that's started to brew and send its aroma up the stairs. Don't leave without saying goodbye. Kiss her on the forehead; she won't feel it, but my lips have been there just the same.

She won't be up until the talk show stages are filled and I've already done hours worth of work. With a goodbye firmly planted on her skin, I walk downstairs and pour my coffee. Slip on my black trench coat, cinch the waist, and pick up an umbrella to help the coat in a collaborative effort to protect me from the elements. The elements; now that's where the difference for that Wednesday came into play.

It was god awful outside. The sun never even rose that morning. Autumn rain was pelting the windows and echoing off of the roof, hard at work before the day began. The early November air was frigid, intensified by the mingled chills of morning and the pouring rain. Dart to the car. Turn the key. Along with the roar of the engine comes the chatter of the voices of morning radio. Caller number twelve has just won lunch for two at the Elk Room. Congratulations caller number twelve.

That day's liaison with the morning personalities was unfortunately

lengthened due to the inclement weather. Its not just the disc jockeys that get me. They're bad enough, but then throw in the commercials. Like the car dealerships that tell you about this great deal and then read the little red print really fast and in a different voice. It's like if they just read the statement outright that says, "Okay, so we lied. We'll screw you so hard that you end up paying twice the sticker price but you don't have to pay a dime of it until the year 2000." Just use that quick new voice and I guess they suppose we morning listeners don't get their trick. Sorry, back to the point.

It's raining so hard that I can barely see the road. Not even people to watch in the rear view images that remind you that you're not alone. Innumerable faces, dead eyes focused on the asphalt, counting the broken white lines, smoking their cigarettes and pounding down their coffee before the work day begins. Fueling up their bodies before floundering through another day; pumping in the chemicals that keep the bones moving until the time clock frees them. No, not that day.

Only the water obscuring the view of the streets and the hypnotic dance of the windshield wipers, trying so hard to keep the deluge away. One of those mornings where you hear the wipers scraping against the window for so long that you begin to think there's a tune there. Anyway, at ten minutes until eight I enter the firm.

My wet shoes squeak on the cold marble floors, echoing through the lobby as I tentatively walk towards the elevator. The bell boy touches the button for the third floor and as it lights up he musters up one of the three or four mundane salutations from his repertoire, all of which are dependent on the day's weather. "Good morning, Mr. Weeks. Hope you didn't get too wet out there."

"Like water off a duck's back, Joe," I reply and step off the elevator. If you have nothing nice to say, talk about the weather.

My secretary meets me at the corner, looking uncharacteristically pale, her eyes sallow beneath her long white forehead, topped with a tight gray twist of hair. "Morning Sally. Why so grim?," I inquire.

"Am I grim today, sir? Maybe its the weather. Something in the air. There's coffee made."

I extend my mug, gesturing for a warm-up. "I don't know how I'd get through the day without you, Sal," I say with a wink, noticing as I take my mug from her hand that a glimmer has come to her tired blue eyes.

Past her desk and into my office I walk, ready to start the clock and sit down with the morning paper. When I reached my door, however, I'm faced with a semicircle of chairs, holding the three crusty partners of the firm. In lieu of individual description, I'll simply ask you to draw it from what you've seen hundreds of time on television and in the movies. Crooked, hardened men with noses painted over with broken blood vessels

like a canvas for the stress of years of staying just one step ahead of their game.

There before me sat the cliche, broken into three models, each a decade or so closer to the grave than the next. Three corpulent necks bound tightly by starched collars, with their round red faces above glistening with oil. I cannot even remember their individual faces now, nor even in their presence could I close my eyes and visualize them.

"Weeks, take a seat please. We need to talk to you."
I feel myself flush and my legs going weak, so I walk gingerly to my desk and sit down in my chair, facing them and suspecting that I'm about to play out a tragedy for the amphitheater before me. "What's the problem, gentlemen," I ask in a falsely flippant tone.

"Well, Weeks," says the elder Mr. Drake, " it's like this. While the firm's a family, we're also a business. When a branch of that family tree starts dying, you have to saw it off so that it doesn't spread to the rest. In short, your work's not up to par, Son."

"So you're cutting me off? Four years and I hit my first losing streak. It happens to everyone sooner or later. Besides, all I can do is argue against the evidence."

"It's not about evidence, Weeks, it's about romancing the jury. You used to have it. Your client's hands could be covered in blood and you could win the jury over with just the right smile," replies Mr. Jackson, the eldest of the three.

"Look," I say, "Give me the chance and I know that I can get it back. Let me have a week, come on. God knows, I could use a vacation. I think I just need to clear out the cobwebs."

The junior Mr. Drake stiffens at my words and says, "Six months without a win, Weeks, six months. I'd say that winning smile's gone for good. It's like you don't even give a damn if you win or lose anymore."

"Please, Sir," I say, "I can still care."

"I'm sorry Tom, but this time you lose again," he replies. "Honestly, we're all afraid that your luck is gonna rub off on us. We don't need that here."

With that, I rise, open my briefcase and fill it with the few personal effects scattered about the office, including the picture of my wife from my desk. As I slide her into my bag, I'm struck afresh with the genuine happiness of her smile as it was six years ago when the photograph was taken. Her youthful green eyes, the wisps of auburn hair that broke free of the pearl clamp holding her locks in place. A beautiful face whose fire only lived in pictures and memories.

Only five years of marriage had fossilized the image of her in the frame, keeping it vibrant in spite of time. In reality, the eyes had grown tired from the boredom of watching the four walls around her. Anxiety pills had

preserved the smile, though the happiness behind it had given way to stoicism. Through all the boredom of decorating and redecorating, watching endless hours of television and catalog shopping, the wax smile had kept up the pretense.

Jane. I could sit in the office and stare at her for hours. I felt more passion in the frame than in the cold hands at home. Once the picture is safely at the bottom of my briefcase, I can feel the divorce between me and the woman in the picture. Now I'd sit at home with the real Jane. The one who kept the shades drawn all day, pacing around the house in the robe that she'd slept in and sterilizing the house until night gave way to morning. I could see it as plain as day, sitting with her in our showplace; the love child of her boredom and my money. Funny how, if you install plumbing and hang some paintings on the walls, the monkeys don't even realize they're in a cage. Six years together and now all I could think of were those beautifully damning words. "Till death do us part."

Brought back by the realization that the Misters Drake, Drake and Jackson of Jackson, Drake and Drake sit watching me, waiting in the room as I scavenge about for anything that I may want to take with me, I decide to abandon all but the picture in my bag and the mug in my hand that my nephew gave to me. Its great, you know, it says "Hang In There" and has that pissed off wet cat hanging from a tree limb. Nothing. Four years, I think, and all I'm walking with is a picture and some tepid coffee. Hang in there!

I sling my bag across my shoulder and stroll to the door, past the partners, looking back into the oak paneled office at the barren mahogany desk, turning around only to say, "I'm really gonna miss the family. You men take care. I'm sure there are some great lawyers in hell to help plead your cases." With a squint of my eyes and a smirk disguised as a smile covering my face, I head for the elevator.

On my way, I pass Sally, slinking towards my office with a pot of coffee in hand. Casting her eyes towards me and then back to the floor, she mutters, "We both knew it was coming, Sir. We'll really miss you around here." With a defeated smile, I step into the elevator and am, once again, greeted by the bell hop, who replies, "Leaving early today? Well, Sir, it's still coming down out there. Try to stay dry." Looking him dead in the eye, I try to comment on the rain but decide that silence is much more polite.

Throwing open the lobby doors, I step into the street, leaving no impression behind me, save for the dying echo of my squeaking soles. The sun hadn't yet found its way through the pall of the storm, though the rain seemed like a shelter from the sun's light. Throwing my umbrella onto the sidewalk, I step into my car and turn the key. Well, you don't say. Caller number seven just won tickets to see the Stones. Congratulations caller

number seven.

How can I tell her, I think, as I slowly navigate the car through the flooding streets. What was the slogan, "Say it with flowers?" Though she was normally upset by the invasion of her home by the innumerable pollen particles, she couldn't resist lilies. Lilies were the one guarantee that I'd see the semblance of that old smile one last time before I told her. Traffic was moving so slowly that I seemed to be at a standstill. Deciding to break free of the frozen traffic, I pull to the car over to the curb and put it in park. Stepping forth into the rain, I begin walking west towards the florist.

The door swings open, setting off like five of those little bells that make it virtually impossible to make a quiet entrance. The cold air of the store is magnified by my wet skin and sopping clothing. The walls are covered in lattice with artificial greenery interwoven throughout. Helium-filled balloons hover above the room. The dearth of fresh flowers in vases and the coolers fills the air with that sweet but pungent aroma that could only come from a florist or a funeral parlor.

"Morning, sir," chirps the fat woman behind the long counter, "It's a nasty one, huh? Can I help you with something?"

"I sure hope so," I reply, giving her a glimpse of my winning smile.

Over and over she drones about how wonderful it is to know that there are still romantics out there. Coming through that weather for flowers and all. Being the only customer in the store on such a day, I become the target of her one sided conversation. I stand there in silence, arms folded, and watch her wrap the flowers with a precision that tells me that she hadsn't figured out yet that not a damn soul notices the difference.

Staring down at her substantial wrists, watching her motions as she wraps the paper into a bouquet, I notice that she's wearing a thin gold wedding band, nearly obscured by the abundance of the fleshy folds of her skin. Her arms are the same fish-belly white that Jane's slender arms have become; the sign of lost contact with the sunlight and countless hours under fluorescent lamps. That same transparent skin that revealed the hollow blue veins underneath. I figured that gold ring meant that some other poor bastard was probably kicking himself for that same "till death do us part" speech.

"These are going to be just perfect. Your wife's a very lucky woman, but I'm sure she knows that," she says with a smile.

I respond with a quiet smile.

Stepping back into the rain, soaking wet and directionless, I continue walking in the opposite direction of my car. The rain began to come down harder and the stream running down the pavement had risen to the level of my shoes, pouring in and drenching my feet. Trying in vain to shield the lilies, I spot a staircase across the street that leads down to the basement of an immense red brick building. I cross over and look down the stairs to see

the word "OPEN" spelled out in red lights on the solitary window, save for a small porthole in the heavy oak door. I descend the stairs and make my way inside.

No bells on this door, I think as I enter, only to find that this time it's hard to go unnoticed due to the fact that I am one of only three customers that I see, the other two being a couple hidden in a corner table. No light from outside seemed to make it into the room, leaving the illumination up to the reflection against the brick of the walls of the candles set on each of the tables and the green banker's lights adorning the bar. After stealing a sideways glance at the loving pair, I scan the room for a bartender.

Aside from my couple, the only other semblance of life in the room seems to be the music coming from the neon bubbling jukebox by the bar. I make my way up to the bar and take a seat, eagerly awaiting the initial sensation of the alcohol infusing my veins. I am still looking around for a bartender when a faceless male voice chokes out, "So are those flowers for me? You shouldn't have."

Caught off guard, I crane my head around to discover an old man seated at the end of the bar with a pipe in his hand and a half-empty glass before him. Realizing that he is the source of the voice, I focus my gaze on the man. "You look like you need to find a bartender pretty bad, pal," the old man says.

"Understatement. How do I get service around here?" I inquire curtly.

"The flowers then, I suppose, aren't for me. That's a shame. Bartender stepped into the kitchen. Give him a minute," he says.

Within seconds, a tall young man with greased down black hair and pale skin rounds the corner. Judging from the young man's clothing, black pants, a white shirt, and a black bow tie, I gather that he is the bartender and simply state, "Manhattan. Straight up."

"Coming up," he replies.

"I could've ordered for you," the old man announces. "All lawyers drink the same thing. I don't know though. It's a toss up between that and a vodka martini, so it's good that you ordered."

"How did you know that," I ask, as the bartender lays out a napkin on the bar and places my drink on top.

"Look at yourself, walking around in the rain in a thousand dollar suit, dripping wet and carrying around a bunch of flowers getting beaten down with rain. Didn't exactly take Nostradamus to predict that you needed a stiff drink."

"That I'm a lawyer, I mean. How'd you know that?"

"Want a cigarette? I smoke a pipe, but I still have to keep cigarettes on me," the man says.

"I quit, thanks."

"That's funny. I thought you were fired," he said.

"What? How do you know about my job?"

"It's hard to carry on a conversation from all the way down here. Mind if I move down there by you?," the man asks, though he stands up and begins to move his drink and ashtray in my direction before I can respond.

As the man comes closer and settles beside me, I'm able to clearly make out his image. Silver hair, slightly feathered at the temples. Long slender hands, smooth with pointed nails. His eyes were ice blue, like crystal pools whose surfaces change with every ripple. Frightfully inviting yet deeper than the swimmer might expect. He wore a dingy white dress shirt, covered by a faded brown velvet smoking jacket, about which hung the aroma of stale tobacco.

His face and clothing had weathered so over his years, how ever many he'd seen, that he seemed to have grown right out of the bricks of the walls and the oak of the floor and bar. The low light of the room played on his features so that at one glance he appeared to be a very old sixty and at the next he seemed to be a youthful 110. His long white face was hairless except for the thick silver brows above his eyes. When next he spoke, I could smell the intoxicating mixture of smoke and bourbon

"Do you need to talk? I'd say you need to talk, but I don't want to jump the gun," he says.

"Look friend, I'm not ready to pour out my soul here. Besides, I don't even know who you are. Who might you be anyway?," I ask, washing my words down with a gulp of my drink.

"I might be anyone, or anywhere for that matter. Something tells me that here is the place to be though."

"Another," I say in the bartender's direction. "So this is the place to be?," I ask, once more directing my questions to the old man.

"Well, let's look at your choices. Sitting in backed up traffic, waiting for the water on the roads to recede? Your office? Oh, sorry, scratch that one. At home?"

"Can't go home yet. Unless my wife's as perceptive as you are, chances are that she doesn't know that I'm no longer employed. Actually, I'm here, I think, to think over how I can tell her. She's a little on the fragile side."

"I wouldn't worry," the man replies, "you haven't broken her yet."

"Me? You think I'm her problem?"

"Slow down, now. I don't even know her."

I sip my drink and try to explain myself. "Sorry. She's changed. I think she is broken, but I didn't break her. Every day I sit at my desk and stare at her picture, and I pray that she hasn't just ended it."

Igniting a cigarette, the man looks at me with an intensity in his eyes and implores, "Why would she do a thing like that? Is it what you want?"

"Jesus! That's rich."

"Well," says the man, drawing in on his pipe, "what do you want? Surely if that's what you both want then the two of you can come up with a solution. There are so many ways that both of you could do it efficiently if you're both so miserable. Most people would cut off their right hand to have what you both do."

"Are you telling me that we should both kill ourselves? What the hell's wrong with you? And I'm not so sure anyone would give their right hand to be unemployed, or to go home to a virtually dead woman for that matter." With this, I lift my drink to my lips and swallow the last drop.

"I'm only saying that, if it's really so damned bad, you've got your ways out. There's the old car exhaust trick where you just go to sleep. You could jump together from a bridge or something. Now, that should bring back the old romance."

"Or something," I repeat. "I never said that I wanted to die, for Christ's sake."

"Innumerable windows of escape, and as you sit here she sits at home, watching the bottle of pills on the table and thinking the same thing that you are. Maybe open up the lines of communication there, brother, and you'll actually get somewhere. It's the cowardly way, she knows that, but it's painless. Again, you just drift away."

In disbelief, I stare up at the man and his lips part in a smile, revealing the crooked yellow teeth lining his graceful mouth. Unable to speak, I rise from my chair, grab the lilies from the bar, and start for the door. "Hey bud, I got your tab," the old man says with a wink of one of his crystal eyes.

"It's the least you could do," I stammer, running out the door, back into the pouring rain.

Shuffling through my pocket for my keys, I realize that my car is parked blocks away. Damn the power of suggestion! Some stranger who's never seen into my life for a second tells me my wife is at home, ready to end her life. It's no wonder that I get confused talking about it. Panic takes away your logic. Five minutes feel like five hours and suddenly time doesn't add up.

My heart is racing as I try fruitlessly to catch sight of my car in the distance, knowing that Jane may be at home, drifting off to sleep. As I sprint down the busy street, rain pelting my eyes, my clothes slow me down from the weight of the water they've absorbed and their inclination to cling to my legs. I pull off my overcoat and cast it aside. Next, off comes the sopping silk tie and the black jacket of my suit. Finally, the socks and shoes. Having shed the bulk of my hindrance, I break back into a run, with my white shirt clinging to my chest and bare feet stinging as each foot

strikes the pavement. Clinched tightly in my fist, the flowers flop wildly about as I make my way.

When at last I reach the car, I jump inside and turned the engine. The morning personalities are busy spinning some top-forty music and planning what to give away next to keep people listening. As I turn the corner, I see that, although the rain is still coming down, traffic is once again moving and my chances of making it home are good. For the twenty or so minutes of the drive home, my mind races ahead of me, bringing me images of a number of morbid scenarios into which I might walk.

Fighting the images of my wife, having fallen victim to her own sorrow, dead on the cold bathroom floor, or comatose on the sofa, I try to jolt myself into reality by telling myself that the man was crazy. Maybe I'd been in trial with him and he knew my face. Maybe I was the reason that he went to jail. He was just pulling facts that he knew out of the air to trouble me or plant seeds of doubt in my head. Surely that was it. However convincing my arguments, I never decreased my speed. In fact, I sped up, knowing deep down that, had I ever seen those eyes before, I would surely remember them. Ironic that I could tell myself that I could possibly forget them, for that's precisely what I've spent hours of every day since trying to do.

Passing by the newsstand where I normally stopped in the morning and the cafe where I always stopped for lunch, to eat my turkey on wheat at noon, it hit me that she wasn't my problem. We were the same, Jane and I. Victims of a routine, stuck in the middle of a circle that whirled around us daily. My boredom was a vast desk with her memory staring me in the face. Hers was an empty house with my absence hanging in the cold, disinfected air.

That Wednesday I realized that, if I intended to make it over the hump and on to Thursday and Friday, something had to break the routine. On reaching our home, I notice that the only light in the house is a glaring red blur dancing before the kitchen window. She'd fallen asleep and let the stove catch again, I was sure of it. Throwing open the front door and running through the foyer, my wet feet slip out from underneath me on the marble checkered floor. As I clamber onto my feet, my senses become aware of the smoke, which is instantly burning my eyes and clouding my lungs.

I can smell the mingled odors of burning rubber and hair. As I shuffle into the kitchen doorway, covering my mouth and nose with my wet sleeve, I see that the old man was wrong. The pill bottle on the counter is still full, though alongside it stands a can of lighter fluid and a box of kitchen matches. I drop the battered lilies at my side and stand in the doorway, clutching the frame to support my body, the components of which have seemingly lost their synergy, leaving me unable to move a muscle.

Before me flails the source of the flame in the window. My wife, more awake than I've seen her in years. Her silk robe is nothing more now than a burn covering her steaming black body. The wayward wisps of her auburn hair are nothing more than blackened cinders. As she slumps to the hard tile, I take my last look into her wide open eyes.

So there you have it. And, as I've said, I don't know that any of your questions or mine have been answered. Why she did it, I don't know. Why I didn't get there in time, I don't know. And why anyone would do something so painful to herself, I don't know. I've always told myself that a man should never try to gather up sense where sense is not. Perhaps my doctors should stop and listen to my advice rather than this same old story. If they think that I understand it better than they, well they're wrong. I only know that I'd be free to move on, if only my alibi had told me his name.

Untitled
Kelley Brown
silver gelatin print

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CALLIOPE

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Submissions are accepted throughout the fall semester for the following years publication. Submissions should include the students address and phone number, and may be placed in one of the Calliope collection boxes located around campus. Any students interested in working on the 2003 edition of Calliope should contact Dr. Christopher Baker in The Department of Languages, Literature, and Philosophy.

Editor's Note

In light of world events, the Calliope staff would like to dedicate this journal to the men and women who serve in the United States military. Soon, some of our own classmates will be serving our nation in a war zone. Those students, our friends, and the many AASU students who came before them, already serving in the armed forces, and the soldiers that we all know, are the reason for this dedication. Let us never forget what it is they give up for us.

This years staff would also like to name names. Captain Shawn Roduin, Sgt. Thomas Nezbeda, Sgt. Brian Cole, Master Chief Edward Munyer, and the Captain and crew of the USS Kitty Hawk, CV-63. Thank you all.

There may be some question as to the material contained in this journal. We, the staff, believe that this is a testimony to the freedom that is provided to us by our armed forces.

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Kitty Roberts

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Susanna

My Little Pool

Joe Blankenship

Ideas Without End

Stephanie Raines

Cover Art: Operation Enduring Obession Part 3

Stephanie Raines

Fiction

A View of One's Own

Mike Rios

A job! A job. She wants a job. I knew this would happen. I saw it coming the second she started bringing those damn books home. No, not the romance ones, the ones with Fabio and horses and—what's the deal with women and horses anyway? No, everything was fine when she read those kinds of books. I'm talking about the big books, the ones with ideas, not just stories. The ones that showed her what the world is really like. "Jimmy," she says to me one day, out of left field, "the world is not what it seems." Jesus Christ, no shit. I could have told you that. I thought I was going to get that promotion last year after busting my hump. Nope, no such luck. Gave it to Jones instead. Jones. The world ain't what it seems all right. Hard work don't always pay off. The best man for the job don't always get that job. "It took you how many books to learn that?" I asked her. Without missing a beat she says she didn't learn it from any book. What she learned from reading was that other people saw it, too, and that other people could express (yeah, express, she used the word express) what they saw. That's when I knew. I knew there was going to be trouble. But I didn't do anything about it. I should've, but I didn't. I mean, so she thinks she's found some kind of connection with some

book, maybe even some writer. Big deal, these guys are mostly dead anyway, right? What do I got to worry for? Besides, it's not like she was ignoring the kids or the food or my clothes or the house, you know? The books were on her free time. So I guess I kind of just hoped that I was wrong, that this wasn't going anywhere. Two months later I find out I was right, about as right as I could be. What happened? I'll tell you. I get home from work one night, after taking orders from I've-got-something-to-prove Jones all day and I walk upstairs to take a shower when I hear the television in the kids' room. I go in to see what they're up to and instead I find no kids, just her watching some British lady in some library talking to the camera about Shakespeare's sister. I didn't even know he had a sister. I wonder what she looked like. (She was probably stacked; all women at that time were stacked.) Is this lady supposed to be some great, great granddaughter of hers or something? First I get shushed and then, when I insist on an answer, I get "No, she's playing Virginia Woolf," real calm-like, as if I should've known this already. Woolf? Shakespeare's sister was named Woolf? She shakes her head and tells me she'll explain later. Something about her voice bugs me. But I can't quite place it. So I say "fine" and go take my shower. In the middle of rinsing off it hits me. She sounded just like the lady on the video. She sounded like Martha Jones, the lady who's now my boss. She sounded strong. And tonight I get the I –want-a-job speech, something about having her own room. I told her we can't afford to make another addition to the house. She threw a book at me, told me to read it and went to her mother's. So now I'm sitting here in front of the television wanting to watch the game but I got this problem. Do I let her work? I wonder if Shakespeare had this problem with Virginia.

Stuck In A Moment

Mike Rios

Brandon Morales was on his way home. He descended the front steps of the station house and walked across the parking lot. He reached his pickup truck (make: Toyota; model: Tundra; year: 2001) and entered his vehicle. He never once looked around.

He sat in the driver's seat for a moment, taking a deep breath of muggy air. Exhaling unhurriedly, Morales noticed he was holding the file he had been working on. He should not have taken it with him. True, he was not done with it, but he had promised Olivia no work tonight. He thought about taking the file back to the station and decided against doing so. He was the solitary detective working the case, barring Havard (who was lending a bit of help), and as such he knew the file would not be missed. He could just leave it in the pickup when he arrived home. Besides, he did not really feel like walking back into the crowded station, climbing the stairs, and returning to his desk; not because he was tired—which he was; he was nearly exhausted—but because he was afraid he would not be able to escape a second time on the same day.

No, I've got to go home.

Thinking of the trip home, a trip that would prove lengthy at this time of the afternoon, Brandon pushed a huge key into the ignition switch and turned it. A thunderous tap, however, prevented Brandon from commencing his journey. Completely unstartled—his reflexes had been worn during the past

few days—he looked out his side window. Standing in the hot Savannah sun was detective Anthony Havard, his deep brown skin glossy with sweat, his mouth open in a wide grin.

Morales reluctantly pressed a button; the window slid down and disappeared.

"You finally gone, Bee?" asked Havard in that stentorian now-I'm-going-to-tell-you-something voice of his.

Morales saw where this was going—resistance was more than futile; it meant a prolonged lecture. "Yeah."

"Good. I don't want to see you until tomorrow. You hear me? Don't be sneaking back down here tonight! Got it?"

"Uh huh," Brandon replied, fingers spread on the file beside him, hoping Havard had not seen it.

"I ain't kidding. I told Johnson to have his S.W.A.T. boys on special call just in case you feel drawn to that desk of yours. Go home and get some rest. On second thought, just go home and get some. You need it!"

"Gotcha." Morales had received the same speech from his lieutenant ten minutes ago.

"Alright now." He turned to walk away and paused. "And say hi to Olivia for me."

"I will not."

"Hey, if you don't I will."

"Not with a fat lip, you won't."

"I got a fat d—?"

Brandon slammed on the gas, screeching backwards, drowning Havard's voice out. He had managed a genuine laugh and waved thanks to his fellow detective, whom he knew would see the wave for what it was.

A transitory feeling of satisfaction filled him, although he had not accomplished anything more than leaving the station and its parking lot. He knew this had been a greater obstacle than it seemed. So he allowed himself the feeling, even if it did last for only a couple of blocks before fading, perturbation following in its wake. Morales had now joined Savannah's afternoon traffic, a fraternity/sorority of sorts practicing equal opportunity enrollment. Black, white, young, old, female, male, there were no requirements to be a member of Sigma Savannah Rush-Hour, save one: you must not, by any means, be able to competently operate your vehicle. It seemed that if you knew yellow meant slow down and not speed up, or if you knew the left lane was for passing and not coasting, or if you knew the right-of-way … if you knew what "right-of-way" meant, then you were not—under any circumstances—allowed to drive on the streets of Savannah. Morales did not know the statistics for accidents, the only numbers he paid attention to were those that told his clearance rate, yet he guessed it was high, based on the hyperbolic sense he had of having driven past so many a scene of twisted metal.

Case in point: Last summer a young graduate student attending a university an hour outside of Savannah had decided he wanted to meet his girlfriend for lunch off campus. He had jumped in his Jeep and driven along the university's main circle, probably hoping to see his girlfriend's blue eyes in a few minutes. He did, indeed, get to see those remarkable eyes, but he had had to wait for days instead. Why? Because another student had decided to drive along the circle at the same time, in the opposite direction, in his lane. After having flown through the front window of his Jeep and having landed on the front hood of a Jimmy, the student—whose girlfriend had been waiting at a nearby Ruby Tuesday's wondering where the hell he was—came to a week later at East Georgia Medical Center. His first words? "What happened?" To which his girlfriend had replied, with not a single trace of conscious irony on her part, "Some lady from Savannah hit you." But the irony had not been lost on Brandon Morales, who was friends with the

officer handling the case. "So what'd the lady say?" Morales had asked his friend over a beer one night.

"This is the part that kills me," his friend had told him, setting up the punch line. "The lady looks me dead in the eye and says, 'I've been taking classes here for a while. But they're at night. This is the first time I've driven here during the day.'"

Holding his frosted mug up, Morales had offered a toast. "Here's to Savannah drivers, and the body shops they keep in business."

If the staggering amount of purely bad drivers perturbed him, then a revelation Morales had come to recently completely maddened him. Brandon Morales had been allowed into the fraternity. He was beginning to drive like them. Once he recognized what he referred to as "the symptoms," such as forgetting to use a turn signal and cutting someone off, he was absolutely furious. They had finally infected him, he half-jokingly told Olivia one day. He was aware that his lapses in traffic were emblematic of something larger and far more serious. He had been working too hard for far too long. He had to slow down and take at least a night off. Everyone in the squad knew it. Olivia knew it. And deep down inside he knew it.

He looked at the folder next to him. His thoughts returned to work.

Yellow.

Red.

Morales brought his truck to a halt.

Somewhere around Victory and Lincoln it must have happened. He still could have realized what had occurred had he merely focused in front of him, only he was busy thinking about work at first; then he started thinking about Olivia, thinking about her lying on the sofa downstairs in the red teddy he had bought two Christmases ago. He was thinking about how it would feel to talk to her in the same room—not over miles of fiber optics or radio waves. He was thinking about

how it would feel to touch her. It had been a week and a half, ten days. Olivia, he thought, without thinking her name.

The traffic light turned green, and he waited as the dozen cars in front of him inched forward; a few actually made it across the intersection. Not surprisingly, the light turned red two cars before him. Taking the pickup out of gear and resting a foot on the brake pedal, his thoughts shifted from Olivia to Josephine, Josephine Wells.

You need to stop, he told himself. Let it rest, at least until tomorrow. But, of course, he could not. He knew the new lie was just the old one. He could not put her aside that easily, not after all he had been through. No, after all she had been through.

Ten days, he thought once more, consciously bringing Olivia to the foreground. Ten days since he had eaten dinner or lunch or even breakfast with her. There had been chances, opportunities, afforded the couple to share a meal within this time. He had not, however, capitalized on any of them. Not for lack of trying, though. It was just that ten days ago someone—statistics and experience pointed to a male—had seen fit to rape and pummel to death a mother of three on her own porch. The exact details of the crime were still unknown; they almost always remain so. The perpetrator had left little evidence, a somewhat perplexing fact given the attack's viciousness. Usually with a beating, the longer the attacker beats on his victim, the more apt he is to lose control and grow careless. Detective Morales had had no luck with such proverbial police logic, however, and neither had Josephine Wells for that matter.

The killer had left only two significant clues, hints, whatever one wishes to call them, with which to somehow catch him: a latex-based compound residue that told Morales he was looking for someone who possessed enough intellect to use a prophylactic and a partial indentation on what was left of Josephine Wells' right cheek that bore a slight resemblance to a class ring, again pointing to the

possession of some amount of intellect on the killer's part. In short, he had nothing. For without more evidence or, God forbid, witnesses willing to talk, Savannah's thirty-first homicide that year (his eighth) would most likely not be cleared. Still, he had an obligation both to Josephine and to the citizens of this city to put down this case. That's what he had told himself from the beginning, standing on Josephine Wells' porch looking at her body on a dark humid August morning. He had an obligation.

A honk.

He looked around and noticed he was holding up traffic. The cars ahead had already driven past the green light while he sat motionless. He raised a hand at the Pathfinder behind him in an attempt to seek forgiveness. In return he received a single raised finger as he passed the yellow-going-on-red light, leaving the Pathfinder to halt its advance before it was underway.

As he slowed down and came to a standstill again Morales turned the air conditioner on high. Cool air rushed out from the vents making his skin tingle with guilt. Two days ago he had had a chance to have lunch with Olivia. He also had an appointment to have his pickup's air conditioning repaired. Faced with the lady or the compressor he had chosen the former, but she, reminding him of the necessity of air conditioning during Savannah summers, told him to go ahead and take the truck to the shop. "You sure? I don't know when I'm gonna get another chance to see you, let alone have lunch."

"I'm sure," she had said into the telephone. "I'm sure."

That night, after visiting Josephine Wells' home for another look around in the hopes of finding something, anything that could lead to the identification of the killer, a frustrated Morales had arrived home with nothing new to work with. Throwing his keys in the crystal bowl atop the foyer table, Morales had slowly climbed the cream carpeted stairs. As he ascended a faint light had been visible from above. His mood lightened a bit, and he moved faster, taking off his jacket

and tie by the time he entered the master bedroom. Two steps in he had stopped, a sigh deflating his body. With hunched shoulders he stood motionless, looking at his wife asleep in bed. Her long strands of yellow hair ran, it seemed, like slender rivers along the folds of the pillows, joining along her face. He could make out a single strand gliding in the air, moved rhythmically by his wife's breathing. Her eyelashes fluttered faintly, her lips trembled and mumbled something inscrutable—perhaps a prayer asking divine protection for her husband in his duty-bound absence or perhaps a curse exacting punishment for that same absence. Whatever its meaning, the thought of deciphering her utterance did not even occur to Morales. He felt he had no right to know what she had said. He had forfeited that privilege a long time ago, journeying as he did into the lives of dead people days on end while ignoring the most important living person in his life. His gaze traveled down Olivia's left arm, stopping momentarily at the thin wrist, around which a gold watch hung loosely. Morales wondered how many times she had glanced at its hands with him on her mind. This train of thought led him to speculate the time she fell asleep. He recalled the formula medical examiners used to determine approximately the time of a victim's death and toyed with the idea of substituting this for that and that for this to come up with a formula to calculate the time that his wife's body had surrendered to exhaustion, no longer able to wait for him.

The lamp was still on, so she had fallen asleep; she had not chosen to go to sleep. A wine glass, smudged with visible fingerprint patterns, sat on her oak nightstand, a small amount of red liquid creating a pool within it. A crease-veined paperback book lay by her hand like a tent put up in a desert of cotton sands. On the book's cover was a painting of a man holding a longhaired woman in his huge heroic arms. A sudden desire to put a bullet through that gorgeous schmuck's face came over Morales as he thought about all the other literary suitors who had been sharing his wife's bed in the warmth of his home. Brandon Morales, Savannah

Police detective, saw no evidence of foul play, simply a woman relaxing in bed before drifting off to sleep. Brandon Morales, graduate of Stony Brook's bachelor program in English, saw a woman searching for the company she could not attain in reality in the pages of another world. Brandon Morales, husband and man, saw a missed chance, a crack in a seemingly stable home, a fissure he was not sure he could keep from widening.

He had wanted to kiss Olivia. Instead, not wanting to wake her, he had kissed the air he hoped would find its way into her lungs. Then Morales had walked over to the burning lamp and turned it off.

Green.

This time Morales noticed the traffic light and pulled his truck forward. He reached what could be considered normal speed for about a half-mile until slowing back down to zero five cars behind a red light at Abercorn and sixty-third. He was approaching Derenne. Soon he would have to get over on the right lane to make his turn. He looked at the vehicle beside him, a blue Yukon. The driver, a heavy-set man with thick lenses in an equally thick set of frames, sat slouched, staring straight ahead. In front of the gas-greedy monster was a red Mustang with a group of teenage girls inside evidently singing, their arms and necks swaying en synch with the music Morales could hear from his truck. He tore his gaze away lest he be mesmerized, too.

At least I didn't see her face, Morales said to himself, his thoughts traveling back two nights again. He had heard stories of detectives gripped by cases, sometimes seeing the faces of victims in place of the faces of loved ones or friends. One story in particular came to mind. A detective, somewhere in Montana (Morales had forgotten the exact location), working the murder of a young girl whose limbs had been severed, had apparently been so overwhelmed that one night during dinner he had seen not his daughter across the table but the young dead girl. Shocked, he had dropped the saltshaker his daughter had asked for and

had begun to weep fractiously. No one would have known about this had it not been for the essay his wife had written in a police journal after the detective committed suicide three days later. The case, Morales remembered, was still open.

At least he saw Olivia's face; that much he was grateful for. At least he had not …

A pair of eyes caught his attention. The smile was next.

For the first time, Morales noticed the car directly ahead of him. He was not wholly certain, but it seemed he must have been behind the white Lexus for quite a while. The Lexus' outside rearview mirror held the reflection of its driver's face. Morales saw a pretty woman looking at him with what appeared to be recognition. She smiled, crinkling the corners of her dark eyes, and suddenly she looked away.

She recognized me, thought Morales. But who …?

He froze.

A name from some distant place emerged. No. It can't be.

He looked at the woman's reflection in the outside mirror, then the inside mirror. He caught her glance again. This time he looked away.

Same hair.

Same eyes.

Same smile.

But …

The light turned green. The Lexus drove forward. He did not know what to do.

He put the truck in gear and accelerated.

It's her, he thought. What's she doing here?

But she doesn't drive a Lexus.

You think she'd be driving that Civic forever? It's been nine … ten years.

I can run a check on her tag. Then I'd be sure.

No.

But she's supposed to be in New Orleans. What's she doing here?

I must've looked like an idiot, staring at her, frozen, not smiling or waving .... And after everything ...

What the hell's she doing here?

The right turn light on the Lexus began blinking. Morales looked at the approaching street: Derenne. The Lexus changed lanes.

Should I catch up to her and flag her down? Get her to stop somewhere so we can ... so we can what?

Morales changed lanes, cutting the red Mustang off.

The Lexus turned onto Derenne. Morales followed.

She's going the same way I'm going. Yeah, but for how long?

As if in answer to his question, the Lexus' left turn signal flashed. Both vehicles changed lanes once more and came to a stop at a traffic light on Herriot.

What are you doing, Brandon?

I have to know if it's her.

Why?

Because if it is ...

He made no motion to get her attention save to look at her rearview mirror. She did not look back.

Morales thought about the letters and the single photograph he kept inside his pistol case at home.

The turn signal continued flashing, a seemingly perpetual alternation between bright and dull yellows.

Morales realized he was touching his wedding ring. He looked down at the wide band. "You need a nice big ring so all the hoochies can see you're taken

from a mile away," Olivia had reasoned. She had recently had it polished, and the ring still maintained its burnish. Morales looked at the scratches along the ring.

The ring, he thought. Goddamnit, the ring!

He quickly pulled his cellular phone out of his jacket and dialed Havard's number. One ring. Two rings. A crackle. A voice.

"Hello."

"Josephine Wells."

"Oh, hell. Come on, Bee, give it a rest."

"Listen."

An undisguised sigh.

"Listen! What's the highest grade Josephine Wells reached?"

"I can't say. She was a high school drop-out."

"Yeah, at first. But didn't one of her sisters say she had gone back to school, taking evening classes without telling anyone? The sister knew only 'cause she'd surprised Josephine studying."

"I remember. So what? She never finished. Like I said, technically she's … she was a high school dropout. That's the tragedy."

"No. I got a feeling Josephine finished. I think she struggled and struggled and finally she graduated. Only she didn't tell anyone about it. Maybe her kids would feel ashamed or something. None of them finished. I think she didn't want to seem like she was bragging." The light turned green. "I think she was proud, though. So proud she bought the biggest class ring she could afford. I think whoever killed her—"

"—Took that ring," Havard finished.

The Lexus pulled forward.

"I'll make some calls tomorrow to the Board of Ed," Morales said, "find out where she was taking classes, when she graduated, what company she bought the ring from. It wouldn't hurt to try the pawn shops, too."

"Tomorrow?"

The Lexus turned left.

"Yeah, tomorrow."

Morales pressed the "end" button on his phone. The Wells' case was not put down. Not yet, he thought. But it's a start.

He looked at the traffic lights in the distance. All green. Olivia would die laughing, he thought. "Why do I always have to catch every red light?" she often asked. Turning his left signal light off and shifting his truck into gear, he pressed his foot on the gas pedal and drove straight ahead. Brandon Morales was on his way home.

Silence

Jeanette Kehr

Isa crouched behind the tall pine, as she watched Haley leave the house tugging at her dress and pressing the collar with her good hand. Last night their father had twisted the other because his supper had been late. Today Isa made sure his supper would be on time.

The heat of the metal door scorched her knuckle when she knocked. No sound came from inside. The sun scalded her back and her feet fought the concrete beneath them. The beating of her heart prevailed over her small frame. Yellow orange hair fell in her face as she shifted the plate from her left hand to her right. Putrid green is her least favorite color and it covered the porch like a veil, stagnate. Its color only accentuated the odor of cigarettes and filth.

She whispered into the burning metal. "Daddy."

Her protective freckles dripped with sweat and she licked her dry lips. Tugging at the cream color cotton shift caused more sweat to drip down to her naked buttocks.

"Daddy."

Facing him is unbearable, like the heat. Quietly setting the tray on the wooden cart, which lay next to the spigot, she cupped the cool liquid and splashed her face.

"Damnit, child! Turn off that water. I did not tell you you could have any of that, now did I?" He stepped out onto the porch and two strides reached out and twisted her arm. Spittle dripped as he spoke. "Turn it off! Now!"

Rubbing her arm from his attack she feigned a smile. "Daddy, I brought your dinner—see Daddy—here—and it's on time."

"Hmmm…" Scratching his head he added. "Did you bring me a clean shirt and pants. You know I can't wash my own clothes on accounta my arthritis." Isa backed away as he grabbed the plate.

"No, daddy….Haley hasn't finished it. But, I'll bring it to you before sundown. I promise." She looked at the purple bruise forming on her arm and grimaced. "Daddy, please let me have some water. I'm thirsty. I promise I won't drink a lot. Just a little….please." Her blue eyes fought against the sun. she noticed his silhouette was as hers, small. His freckles were hers also. Even his blue eyes were hers, but her sweat was his.

"A runt like you ain't got no business drinking my water. Go on back to the river. There is plenty there for the taking." Looking into his cold blue eyes she could see she would get nothing from him. What he did want to give her, she didn't want. She turned to run and was caught by his long bony fingers. They wrapped around her stick like arm and yanked her to his smelly chest. His stale breath caught her neck. "You're next little one. Just wait and see." Then he let go and disappeared as fast as he appeared.

Behind the metal door she heard him coughing. The spigot still running she decided not to risk him seeing her drink and turned it off.

In her ten years she had never spent more than six months in one home. They hopped from house to house, sometimes only twenty minutes from the last and sometimes longer. It depended. If her father could find a vacant place they settled. The last place in Laurelton, she even got to go to school. It seemed that her and Minnie Frye were just becoming chummy when he packed their belongings

and carried them off again. This time they crossed the state line into Alabama. Swamps took over. Misquitoes were plentiful and clean water scarce. It took them five days to find this little shack. It looked like no one had been here in a long time, so they settled.

Why would anyone put a metal door on a house in this heat, Isa thought to herself. She had to hurry if she was going to get his clothes to him before sundown. The further she walked away from the dingy old shack, the more she felt like she was being watched. She cut her eyes back to the shack and saw the curtains shift just a bit.

As she slid down a bumpy hill to reach the small cove, Haley was wringing out the last of the clothes.

Into the murky water she went.

"Isa!"

the tightness of her skin cooled as she bounced into the water. Silhouetted against the sun, Haley draped a dingy white T-shirt over a dead tree limb. Isa loved to watch her. Haley was different. Her dark hair and eyes reminded her of her mother. A twinge of jealousy caught itself in her throat as she held her breath and went under.

Where was her mother? Isa asked herself that question every day. The last time she saw her was a year ago. They had all lived in Texas, in a nice house with two bedrooms. For Isa it seemed to be perfect. One day her father came home from work and said they had to pack. "Your mama is dead. She had an accident." The shock of this news devastated Isa. Her father never mentioned their mother again.

Under the water there was no sound. Only a vacuum. A fish touched her face. It wiggled in and out of her toes as her dress flowed around her like a blanket. The quiet underworld had no audible sound, yet she heard everything.

The bubbles from her nose tickled. The beat of her heart rhythmically sang as her hair flowed protectively around her. A tap on her shoulder brought her back.

"Isa…Isa….answer me…"

Up and out Isa popped out of the water like a perch baited by a hook.

"I'm here." She shielded her eyes from the sun to get a better look at Haley. At sixteen she looked old. Her shoulders slumped with an invisible weight.

"Come on Haley…get in…' She giggled pulling Haley into the water.

"Isa! I can't. I have to…." Her face went under water. They stared at each other as their hair floated to the top. Isa smiled. Haley pushed her feet and shot out of the water spitting and choking.

"Isa. You know I hate to get under the water. It's too quiet and besides it's dirty."

"Hey, you! Get me my clothes. Now!" He held up his arm and shook his fist.

"See, Isa…you got me in trouble. Now he's mad." She grabbed his sun-dried clothes and quickly walked away. She slipped and fell calling out to him. "I'm coming. Papa."

Why didn't she call him daddy like me, thought Isa. At the top of the hill Haley handed him the clothes. Isa watched as Haley was pulled away from sight. The sun burned her retinas and her face felt flush. The water suddenly became smelly. She felt the hot breath of the fish rise around her leg. Her feet sunk into the muddy bottom as a twig wrapped around her fiery red hair. As her face entered the water her scream was muffled. She wasn't sure if it was her voice she heard or Haley's.

Her eyes opened and she heard nothing. Under the water the sounds were quiet. She wanted to stay forever. The beat of her heart was steady, and her hand pulled the twig out from her hair. She thought about how fragile Haley was and how much she looked like her mother.

As she lay on the small grassy shore, she heard the screams. They reverberated throughout her body causing her to shudder. Sitting up straight she picked up the tree branch where his clothes had hung. As she walked up the hill, she thought about the water. Soundless. Motionless.

Waste Nothing

Jeanette Kehr

Earlier this morning I had yelled at Granny, not because she's hard of hearing; she just doesn't want to listen. "It's not gonna rain, Granny! Don't waste your time on these dead things." What did I know, after all, I'm only ten. Before dawn, she woke me up barking out orders. I was to fill bucket after bucket of water for the dried up brown corn stalks in her makeshift garden behind our house. "Hush, child! That is your life you are giving up on. Go on now—water before they curl up the rest of the way and die. We got to save the corn." With sore hands curled around my lukewarm glass of milk I gulped and ran.

It was too unbearable to water when the sun came up, so me and Granny sat together at the bare wooden table eating crusty day old biscuits and scrambled eggs. There was no butter, but plenty of jam. She put her red cracked hands together to pray to the Lord up above. I don't have to wonder what she's praying about. Rain. With her lips pressed against her hands she spoke quietly, like a book. The only other time she spoke was when barking orders, as if I were a child. Even though she was outside working alongside me, sweating like me, I was always surprised at the fact she always smelled like mint.

"Momma's not comin' back and it's not gonna rain!" My fork hit the daisy pattern of my plate sending a chip into my glass of milk. Her steel blue eyes stared at me in disgust. "Stop looking at me like that! I'm tellin' the truth and

you know it." I wasn't sure if the pain in my stomach was from hunger or her eyes.

Trickles of sweat spilled onto her grease laden plate as she continued to bow her head. When she finished her eyes softened and she passed me the salt. "No Granny! I don't want salt. I want…." She pushed the salt closer, but I grabbed the pepper instead and pounded the bottom of the shaker.

The raspy breathing of Angel Baby in the next room echoed in my head. The kitchen windows were open, inviting the hot sticky air to meet with the smoldering grease head on. Because I had to squint I barely saw Granny arch her back to retrieve the last drop of tea from her huge glass. The lemon wedge was stuck at the bottom, so she put her dirty hand inside to grab it. Her lips curled around the lemon wedge and her eyes became milky.

I stared at the yellow soupy eggs swimming on my cracked plate and my stomach growled. "I do wish it would rain, Granny."

As she crunched on her last piece of ice she spoke calmly. "No waste!"

Boy, how many times have I heard that one? Even my bath water is sparse. An inch of water was barely enough to wash my feet, yet she spared nothing for the garden. I wanted to wash my hair and my dress.

Angel Baby's crying reminded me why everything was so sparse. I popped out of my chair and went into her room. The pink walls were fading compared to her flaming cheeks. Her frail little hands grabbed my dress as I cuddled her. With closed eyes, I nuzzled my face into her black curly hair. "It's all right, Angel Baby. Stop that cryin'…Mattie's here for you."

Mama left us a year ago. When Angel Baby came out sick, she split. "Your mama is not strong like you, Mattie." Granny would always say. Every now and then money would arrive in the mail, but it was not enough.

Angel Baby wrapped her arms around me and coughed. Her sweet baby powder smell entered my nose and seeped through my skin as I held her. "Granny, it's time for her medicine!"

Lately we've been giving her half doses. Her teeth gritted the spoon, but the medicine passed through her tiny cracked lips. Yesterday Granny had said the doctor would come. We waited, but he never did.

Even in a cool tub of water, Angel Baby's flesh felt hot and dry. I cradled her head as she lay in the tub screaming. In the corner of her room rattled a small metal fan. It didn't do much good. Only mixed up the steaming hot air with my sticky sweat. Angel Baby cried until I took her out of the water. Wrapping her in a clean white towel, I held her close. She laid her head on my shoulder and slept.

I felt a stabbing pain in my back as I stood at the kitchen doorway watching Granny wash the breakfast dishes. My cracked plate was still on the table. Waste not, I thought to myself as I handed it to her.

As I sit next to Angel Baby's crib holding her, the curtains flutter. A cool breeze billows into the room as the clouds get darker. "Granny, look! It's gonna rain. Come here and see."

As she stood next to me, her alabaster hand touched my shoulder. Angel Baby's head languished in the crook of my neck. Her breathing is raspy and her cheeks are still warm. Slowly it drizzled outside. The corn drank. I reached outside the window and let the droplets fill my hand. I wet her cheek and lick my hand tasting her salty skin. Lightning fills the room and I wondered where mama is. Is she standing somewhere watching the same rainstorm? Secretly, I hoped she wasn't. It didn't belong to her.

I Should

Stephanie McCord

The smell of her perfume, Pleasures, sticks to the yellow wallpaper. The sweet aroma overpowers the fresh red roses sitting on the nightstand. The bathroom light casts a shadow across the hallway wall that leaks into the bedroom. The footprints embedded into the blue carpet are fresh. I can smell her body on the bedspread and on the sheets; strands of her brown hair speckle the pillow. She's standing in the corner next to the lavender chair. I watch her. She grabs her pink t-shirt off the chair and puts it on—head first, then each arm. She then picks her jeans up off the floor; sits on the bed, and slicks each well-shaven leg into the leg holes. The white Nikes come next. Vicki walks to the mirror and straightens her hair, then dabs perfume behind each ear.

I don't know why she does that. It doesn't hide the smell of sex. But I guess it really doesn't matter. It will be 10:30 at night by the time she reaches David's bed, David's home, their kids. It will be 10:45 at night before she puts her wedding band back on.

I watch her walk out of the room. I see her shadow shrink down the hallway. The front door is being unlocked. The metals clank against each other. The door opens, and squeaks with every centimeter of movement. There are footsteps, just a few. The door closes quickly. There's no squeaking this time. I hear the metal again—

metal inserting into metal. The door is being locked. I should get up and put the chain on. I'm tired.

It's 7 o'clock, and time to get up and get dressed. I need to go clothes shopping for winter. Winter is good. I can hide my fat and body freckles under layers of sweaters and long johns and long skirts. Unfortunately, I can't hide the freckles on my face—make-up doesn't cover everything. Hum. In my last check up, the doctor says I'm perfect for my height. I know he's lying— he's just trying to avoid telling me the truth. Women shouldn't be 5'11" and 140 pounds. We should be petite and thin like my mother is.

I need a shower first. I have to get that smell off my body—out of my hair. The shower always takes so long. I should really cut my hair at least to my shoulders. I can hear my mother now: my hair is my best feature. It hides my body. Vicki likes my hair. She likes the way it lies on the small of my back. She says it has endless motion. The blond and red strands go on forever. She enjoys the softness of it against her breast. I keep telling her I'm going to cut it, but each time she talks me out of it. I really should cut it.

The drive to the school is the same; out of the driveway in my safe burgundy Saturn, and down the road three blocks to the school. I pass the same brick homes, and the same fenced-in yards. And the same happy couples kissing each other goodbye for the day. It's a safe school, no drugs, no violence, no bullies. A nice safe school. We start promptly at 8:30.

I have one child who gives me a little trouble—Brian. He has a hard time focusing. He's not mean or hyper. He's just active. Most third grade boys are active. I sometimes find myself staring at Brain. He has the same soft blue eyes and blond hair I had as a child. I wish he was mine, but he's not. He's Vicki's. He likes to tie and untie his shoes again and again. It's part of his compulsive behavior. When I tell

him to stop he always says the same thing to me, "Ms. Jones, don't you like the way I tie my shoes? I'm the best in the class."

Sometimes I feel I'm not objective enough with Brian. I love all my children—each one is special. I spend a lot of extra time with Brian. He would probably do better in a special education class. There are only 10 kids in that class. There wouldn't be so many distractions for him. Maybe I'll ask Vicki to start dressing Brian in sandals. I should probably do something about the shoe situation before it leads to something more serious. I do love all my kids.

12:15 comes, and all the kids line up for lunch. The children follow the yellow tape on the floor that leads to the lunchroom. We pass paintings, done by other children, along the way. The walls are so white everything against them is magnified. The lunchroom smell is the same five days a week. It smells like nachos. Why nachos I don't know, but it's nachos. It doesn't matter what the ladies cook; it always smells the same. I sit the children at our designated table, and then I go to the teacher's lounge to eat.

The odor of coffee and cigarettes smacks me in the face as soon as I open the door. This place is the safe shelter for teachers. Sarah Miller complains about her husband. Richard Asher wants to take some time off to visit his grandchildren. I sit on the green vinyl sofa gazing at the new playground equipment. I hope to God none of my children get hurt on it. It's 12:30. I'm sure Vicki is feeding the baby right now. Afterwards she'll call David, and ask him what he wants for dinner. She constantly makes him his favorite. I'll go home at 3:30 and pop in a Lean Cuisine. I have got to start eating more fruits and vegetables. I really should eat better.

Dinner is eaten, the fish are fed, and the cat is playing with her new ball. 5 o'clock wears on my eyes. I have to stop grading papers so I can feel my fingers again. The numbness is an overwhelming feeling when you're tired. I try to be fair, but it's hard when I'm tired. I always grade Brian's test last. I'm too tired by that

time to be picky. I never use red. My first spelling test was in second grade. There was so much red I threw it away at a friend's house. I never want any of my children to feel like they've failed. They have plenty of time to feel like hopeless entities.

Vicki won't be over until 9:00 o'clock. I'll spend my night cleaning the one fork I used for dinner, picking out the dress I'll wear tomorrow for school, and vacuuming around the litter box. I'll talk to my mother. The conversation is always the same. It starts at 7:00 p.m. and lasts until 7:30 p.m. Within that thirty minutes she'll ask me about school, and I'll say it's fine. She'll then ask me if I've been dating, and I'll say no, I'm too busy with school. This takes exactly thirty minutes; by the end of the week that is almost two hours of relaying robotic answers.

At 8:00 o'clock Vicki will call. When her husband yells who's on the the phone, she will tell him she's talking to Brian's teacher. Her excuse will be, "He had a bad day." The conversation will be over in eight minutes. It will be long enough for her to tell me what time she's coming over tonight and not to worry, because she told David she was coming over to discuss next month's PTA meeting. It's always the same time each month—9:00 o'clock. I should tell her not to come. I should tell her to quit stringing me along, but I don't.

I need a break from this.

It's 9:00 o'clock, and Vicki steps out of her Windstar. I often think how that car doesn't fit her. She should drive a Camry—a green Camry. That's her. David picked out the Windstar. David picked out their house. Vicki lets him make all the decisions. She lets him control everything. I want some power. I should be equal in this relationship, but I'm not. I should count in her life. I think I should.

I guess I'm lucky this month—twice in a month, back-to-back days. That cold has worn David down. He is so doped up on cold medication; he doesn't notice the empty space next to him.

She comes in the house. The smell of Pleasures radiates around her. The sweet aroma brings images of flowers floating around her—blue, green, and purple.

They fall lightly into her hair and around her tiny feet. A closer inspection reveals the smell of Bounce. That's what she was doing today. The baby vomit did not come out of her shirt. Her pink blouse stained with baby vomit—that's ok. I have some Spray-n-Wash that will get it out. She should let David do more of the housework and child rearing. They are his sons. I think I'll say something tonight to her about that. I worry too much about her kids.

I should become a foster parent. That extra bedroom is going to waste. Brian and the baby would love that room. The room is all boy. The large window invites the sun to dance with the Disney characters on the wall. There they are—Mickey, Pluto and Donald Duck. I love the light blue paint that covers the walls—and the ceiling fan. What little boy wouldn't want an airplane shaped ceiling fan? The room might be a little young for Brian, but it was perfect for him when I painted it two years ago. I should really go and fill out paper work for the foster program. Maybe I'll redecorate the room into something an eight-year-old would like.

Vicki looks around. Her brown eyes examine the living room. I have changed nothing since last night. She proceeds to the bedroom. I turn off the light in the kitchen, the living room, then the hallway. I leave on the bathroom light. I always leave on the bathroom light. The bedroom clock reads 9:10. It will take another five minutes for her to take her clothes off. Vicki throws her jeans and blouse in the corner next to the chair. She's not very neat.

I've been to her house. It is constantly clean. Each month for dinner— the same day, same time, same meal. The smell of pot roast fills the air. The combination of heat from the oven and roast makes the air warm, almost humid, in the house. Everything has a place and everyplace has an object—objects collected over fifteen years of marriage. There's even a ship in the bottle collection in David's private study and Vicki's doll collection in the extra bedroom upstairs.

Vicki likes to take me to that extra bedroom when I'm over under the pretense of showing me her new edition. The kiss she steals feels different from the ones

in my bedroom. I can't explain it, but I don't feel hidden away when I'm in that room. And for those ten minutes I'm with her in her home with her kids in one of her rooms. It feels like I belong somewhere for those ten minutes. At my home.... I have nothing to show from our two years of confinement.

At dinner I sit there across from Vicki, Brian on my left, the baby in the high chair to my right. David is at the head of the table. David cuts the pot roast, and Vicki serves all of us. It's the same conversation each month. How can we raise money for the school? Do we need more books for the library? David is so nice to me, so unaware. He's not a mean man—just a traditionalist. I want to tell him. I want to tell him everything not to hurt him, not to hurt the children, but to get her attention. I want her to make a choice.

Last month's dinner was different. The conversation was the same, but I said something I had never said before—something about my prison. Vicki was having trouble breathing and left the dining room to look for her inhaler. Her thin frame would not receive the air it needed to survive. Gasping for air she yelled, "I can't find my inhaler." I left the dining room and walked into the living room. "You left it in the bed last night. I have it in my purse—just hold on."

I turned around and there in the doorway was David. I saw his eyes. They were gray, and the white was no longer white but red. I headed straight for my purse that sat on the chair in the hallway. There were so many thoughts that were going through my head as I shuffled through my purse. He now knows. This was the day. Thank-God, everybody was going to know. I was free. Finally, I was free!

I walked back in and Vicki was sitting on the couch. David was standing over her. I handed it to her. She would tell him now. She had to. I looked at the clock it was 6:25. Give her eight minutes. Yes, in eight minutes she would breathe the truth. She can't lie—he knows. I could see it in his eyes. He won't even sit next to her. He just

stood over her—hands on hips and knees straight.

I went back into the dining room and sat back down with the kids. I had to give her her space. She needed to tell David alone. It would be easier that way. 6:40 and they were still in the living room. They reappeared at 6:45. David was smiling and the redness from Vicki's cheeks was gone. Vicki looked over at Brian. "Mommy's ok." And Brian smiled back.

David sat back down—shoved a spoonful of mashed potatoes in his mouth and looked at me. "You know, if you wanted book shelves put in your bedroom I would have done it. You didn't have to worry that I would have told anyone what's in the bedroom of the teacher of the year." He laughed then cocked his head towards Vicki.

Vicki refused to look me in the eye. She just stood over the baby fidgeting with the high chair. "Brian, take the baby up stairs for mommy and play with him for a while." I just sat there confused. I could not have heard him right. There was no way. What book shelves? What shelves? I didn't have any shelves. Brian brushed passed me with the baby. I didn't feel the pieces of food falling out of the baby's hand onto my shoulder. Brian glanced over his shoulder and said, "Good bye, Ms. Jones, if I don't see you before you leave." I heard Brian, but I couldn't answer him. I was frozen. She lied to him. She lied to David, and he believed her. Vicki wouldn't look at me. She busied herself cleaning the high chair off. Then with a shot of cold breath that sliced the humidity, "Well it did sound a little odd. Don't you think? You come running into the room yelling—'You left your inhaler in my bed.'"

David took a drink and then smirked, "You won't believe the things that were going on in my head when you said that. I must have looked hilarious. I hope you don't phrase things like that in class. You know Brian will pick that up."

I looked at David sitting there in his brown turtleneck and matching

brown slacks with mashed potatoes on the left corner of his bottom lip. I hated her at that moment— the type of hate I had never felt before. The kind that numbs you to the point that nothing matters any more. You don't want to hurt anybody, but not because you wouldn't, but because you can't. You're powerless to change people. People don't care enough about you to notice you're in pain. I felt that pain at that moment. I wasn't going to change Vicki, but I was going to let David know the truth.

I was going to let him know just to change my prison sentence. I looked at the clock hanging behind David. Then back at him. I opened my mouth. The words were ready. I was ready for it to end. I needed it to end. But what I heard was me—my words, my voice. my humility. "David," I said, and motioned with my napkin to wipe his mouth. And then I heard "Oh, it's the farm boy in me," he said, as he wiped his mouth and smiled at me. Those perfect white teeth. I had always liked his smile, but at that moment. He resembled the snake— the devil himself.

One word was the only thing I could get out. My whole body had refused to work. I excused myself from the table, and by 7:30 I was at my house with my rooms and my dolls and my phantom book shelves.

I don't remember putting my keys in the car door or starting the car or pulling out of the driveway or driving down the dark street. I don't remember pulling into my driveway or getting out of the car or going inside and turning on all the lights. A fifteen-minute car ride, and I remember nothing. But, I do remember locking the front door and sleeping with the lights on. I had to have every light on—it was safer that night.

I should have done more that night.

I watch Vicki pull down the covers and climb into bed. It's 9:15. I don't know why I keep replaying the dinner in my head. My chance to tell David is

gone. It's too late for everything. I stand there in the doorway. I can't bring myself to lie next to her. She's going to hurt me. She does every month. I should tell her to go. Why can't I tell her to go? Why can't I get her out of my mind, my body, my heart? Why do I put myself through this? Vicki glares at me, "Come on. I have to leave early tonight."

I look down at my feet. They are moving by themselves. I can't stop them. I can't grab the doorknob or the dresser. I can't stop. Nothing is registering in my head. My knees hit the bed, and I fall onto the bed and across Vicki. My head falls onto her chest. My chest covers her rib cage. My feet dangle off the bed. It doesn't feel like it once did. I don't tingle by her touch or by her words. Something is gone, and I'm lost on how to get it back. She touches my hair with her right hand. Then works her way down my body until she reaches my left thigh and pulls it across her thigh forcing my feet onto the bed. At 9:25 the touching begins.

Pink at Night

Michael E Roduin Sr.

Ed watched from vulture's row, high above the flight deck, as the aircraft appeared on the horizon. From his elevated position he could see the action on the flight deck as sailors scrambled into position. The purple shirts, known to the crew as grapes, stood by their fuel pumps in the catwalks off the sides of the deck and the red shirts donned their safety gear while manning their vehicles in the rear of the superstructure. The yellow and green shirts moved equipment quickly about the deck, scurrying to avoid an ass chewing from the blues who oversaw it all. It was a normal day on board the USS Kitty Hawk.

Petty Officer Edward Munter looked again at the letter crumpled in his hands. The small pink envelope with the red ink looked out of place in the landscape of steel and aircraft, painted in muted shades of gray, that made up Ed's view. *What the hell happened?* Ed wondered.

He watched the jet, now with a blinking light, approaching from the stern of the ship. Contemplating, he looked up through the Air Boss's window. No surprise there, the Boss was chewing some new guy a fresh asshole or two. It was his job, he knew it, he did it, and he was good at it.

Ed looked the other way in through the back door of the bridge. There was a plethora of low ranking officers running around. *They need a sign that says*

no running with scissors, Ed thought to himself, laughing at his wittiness. The Captain was posted in his chair, looking straight out ahead of the carrier. No jokes about him; you just don't do that. Some guys don't understand that when they first get to the ship. "It's like the quarterback," Ed would tell them. "You don't tackle him in practice 'cause your gonna need him in the game. If you hurt him then all the training and practice in the world can't save you."

Ed put the letter in his pocket and looked back to the approaching aircraft. The sun was setting to the port side. He loved to come up here in the evening and watch the planes land. Standing high above the powerful aircraft he could watch the pilots slam onto the deck with a practiced mechanical grace. For a few minutes at least he could pretend he was controlling them.

This is where he brought his new sailors on their first day at sea. He would bring them out, and looking down upon the hundred or so aircraft being guided by a thousand or so crew members, he would tell them, "God I love my job." They would just stand there and stare at the display of power that went on beneath them. It impressed the hell out of them, and he knew it.

Ed stared out above the commotion on the deck, and out beyond the other ships of the fleet, out past the horizon, and out of the atmosphere. He pulled the letter from his pocket again. *Pink at night, sailors delight*, he thought.

He read the post-script again:

P.S. Ed, when you get a chance, we need to talk.

The rest of the letter had been pretty general. …Mom's fine, Daddy says your doing a good thing…classes are good…my friends and I are going to the beach tomorrow. What the hell did it mean? *I came all this way to fight this fucking war for you, and now you send me a pink letter. Damnitt.*

As the sky began to darken Ed could clearly see that the plane had become an F-14 Tomcat on final approach. The 1MC clicked on: "Flight quarters, flight

quarters, all hands man emergency stations. We have a disabled aircraft coming in."

Looking across the stern, Ed saw the fuel dump from the aircraft's tanks. It was now or never. If he couldn't stick this landing, he would crash into the sea and then he would be at the mercy of Neptune himself.

The red letters on the envelope seemed to stand out, as if in bold print:

Electrician's Mate Second Class Edward Munter

Engineering/E-div USS Kitty Hawk, CV-63

Fpo-Ap 98007

Ed imagined her writing it out late at night in her dorm room. She was writing to the light of a flashlight, not wanting to wake her sleeping roommate.

Does she know what an electrician's mate is? He wondered, *Does she know I am an electrician, or does she think I am some kind of helper? Does she know that I work on live circuits that pulse fifty thousand volts at four hundred hertz through their electrical veins*? Ed remembered the last letter he had written; he never talked about his job, only about her.

More men and women scrambled about the deck. Emergency trucks with hoses and other fire fighting equipment pulled around the super structure loaded with men in silver fire fighting suits. The alarm sounded and everyone moved to their spot. Ed thought it looked like well rehearsed chaos. He had no job during flight quarters and he felt useless to help. He squeezed the letter in his hand, closed his eyes, and prayed for the pilot, his RIO, and the deck crew. It was the same prayer he had said when the World Trade Center Collapsed, the same prayer he said when the war started, and the same prayer he said when the ship set to sea: *Dear god, please save those you see fit to save, and watch over those you do not.*

Opening his eyes, he hoped his view would be different, just for a mo-

ment. He hoped that this was all over, the plane, the voyage, and the war. He hoped that he would be home with Becky. He hoped that everything would be the same as it was before September 11th, 2001.

ROOOOOBAHHHH! The crash alarm sounded and dashed his hopes.

He looked at the letter again; it was signed Love, Becky. Did she really still love him, or was she going to dump him as soon as he got back from this shitty war. "I just wanted to let you come home first, I was worried for you," he imagined her saying. He looked at his image of her in his head. *She must really hate me*, he thought. *She is wearing that low cut blouse I like so much...probably to rub it in.*

The Tomcat was in clear view now, and Ed could see that the port side landing gear had not come down. It could be worse. Ed saw a plane land once that didn't have a tail hook to catch the wires on the deck. He overshot the deck and crashed into the ocean. All they ever found was an arm after his body went through the screws. *Go down without a tail hook, and you're just shit out of luck*, he thought.

Ed's radio beeped. "Ed, you need to get down there and inspect the generator your boys installed," came Ensign Bayone's voice. Bayone was the Division officer. Ed waited before answering.

"I'm a little busy right now sir." *Stupid fucker, what the hell do you think you are in charge of? Dumb ass green officers come in here fresh from ROTC thinking they can just run things. Respect has to be earned.* Ed thought of their last division officer. "An officer can get more done in less time," he used to say. He had ordered two men to work on a live circuit during heavy seas. While they were working, the ship took a hard roll and the men were thrown into the jumble of wires. It killed them instantly. *An officer can put more men in Davy Jones' locker in less time.*

"I want it done, Ed."

"I have an idea for you, sir: want in one hand, and shit in the other. See which one fills up first."

"You're talking to an officer…"

"Fire me, sir." *Ass hole.* He turned his radio from the electrician's channel to the general ship's station.

The letter burned in Ed's hand, and his mind. He remembered the night before he went to sea. Beck had never been with a man before that night, and Ed had been careful not to scare her. At first he was worried that her father might find out, until he took Ed aside. "I know what is going on in that head of yours, son." Ed looked at him. There was little comfort in his eyes. Looking past her father's stoic expression, Ed saw a man with emotions flailing about in his eyes. He did not, however, appear angry. "Becky's older sister Sarah was conceived in the back of a '57 Chevrolet the night before I left for Vietnam." Becky's father looked past Ed to the rust riddled Dodge Dart that Ed had driven up in. "Here is some money Ed. Take care of her."

At first Ed didn't want to take the money, he felt ashamed, but her father forced it into his hand. Ed nodded uncomfortably, still not sure what to say.

"Fair winds and following seas, son. Be careful over there," her father had told him. "I have lost a lot of friends to war. Don't make me put your name on that list."

Ed paused, tripping over the word friend. "Yes sir."

He and Becky had gone to dinner at La Mesa, and then walked on the beach and watched the sun as it set. He remembered Becky's bare feet in the sand as the water would come in, run over them, and then recede again. She was wearing a beautiful long red dress. With him in his uniform, they appeared as though they might be going to the opera. Ed had never been so in love with

anyone. "I'm going to come back and marry you," he had told her. *Idiot.*

The plane was coming closer and closer. Ed changed his radio to the aviation channel, "Roger Boss, I have the ball."

They made love twice that night, and she cried herself to sleep. The next morning she told him she didn't want him to go, "You never know what can happen, Ed. You might fall in love with someone else. I've heard about those skanky Navy girls. A man in every division."

"It's not like that," he told her. It was, but he didn't want her to worry. Some of his friends had reached into the ships pool of women for their love affairs and had been rewarded with the ships pool of STD's for their labors. "Those girls just aren't for me Beck. You are."

She looked at him reassured. As her eyes teared up she looked away. "What if you die over there?"

"I'm not going to die. I am going over there on the most powerful ship in the US fleet. The ship is tried and proven in war. I will be fine, and I will come home to you."

She looked in his eyes and they made love again.

Plumes of smoke poured from the aircraft as the pilot, burning the rest of his fuel, turned on the after burners. The sudden burst of flames propelled him faster and faster toward the deck.

When Becky had dropped him off, he was late, and the goodbye was short. "Hello Becky, how are you?" were the Senior Chief's cordial words. He didn't wait for an answer. "You're fifteen fucking minutes late, Ed. What the hell do you think this is, some kind of party? Would you like an umbrella in your drink?" He always gave Ed, his best electrician, a hard time.

They were good friends. They had all sat together, Ed, Becky, the Senior Chief, and his wife at the ship's party. He and Ed worked out together twice a

week in the gym, although Ed was quite a bit smaller than the six foot four, well over two hundred pound Senior Chief. Becky and the Senior Chief's wife were on the ships party committee together. Ed didn't listen to too many people, but he always listened to the Senior Chief.

"Actually, Senior, I…"

"Get your ass on my ship," he shouted, "un-fucking believable." Ed stabbed at Becky's lips with his own while the Senior Chief pulled him from behind. "Kiss her when you get back." He wadded Ed's dungaree shirt in his fist. "Let's go. You have the first watch."

"Take care of him for me Senior Chief."

"Don't worry ma'am. He is the best electrician we have, maybe the best in the Navy. We need this one."

Now she's probably got some new guy at that school of hers, probably an English professor. They always sleep with younger women. Ed imagined her on the campus of the university laughing with her friends, eating good food, and wearing that low cut blouse. *Damn I miss her.*

Flames ripped the sky behind the aircraft as it got closer. Fifty feet, forty, thirty, ten. Ed forced himself against the wall to brace for an impact. He saw Becky in the clouds before him, telling him to be careful. "Fuck off, bitch," he shouted out at the sea. As if in reply, her image vanished into the other clouds.

The fighter slammed against the deck and bounced back into the sky. Neptune was rolling the seas below the ship, and the F-14 had hit too hard. Ed put the pink letter over his face, afraid of what might come next.

He heard the engine wind down and pulled the letter from his face. The plane was safe on the deck, leaning to the port side where the wheel had not come down.

All was quiet, and Ed collapsed on the small walkway.

The door to the bridge opened. It was the Senior Chief. Ed wiped the

tears from his face.

"What's up, Senior?"

He looked out across the black ocean, waiting for the moonrise, "The Ensign tells me you told him to shit in his hand."

"He was telling me what to do again."

"I'll have to talk to him about that."

They looked at each other and laughed. "So did you come all the way up here to yell at me about that?"

"Ed, you know I don't care if you put some newbie Ensign in his place."

"What is it then?"

"I got a letter from Becky." He pulled it from his pocket. It was on the same pink paper, but the ink was black.

"That bitch, what the hell did she say," Ed tried to put in a stern face for the Senior Chief. "She's fucking some professor at the school there isn't she? Is he an English professor? I fucking hate English."

"Too much time at sea can make you crazy, Ed. I think they say the same about love. Maybe you add those two things together and you have a real problem. Maybe a letter from home, mixed with homesickness, could drive a sailor mad with misplaced anger. All those things together might drive even the best of sailors a bit crazy."

"What did she say?" He looked out as the moon was beginning to come into view. Its elongated reflection left an orange-yellow stripe on the sea from the horizon where it swam to the ship's bow.

"She sent me this letter; she was worried you might overreact. I think she might be right."

"Overreact? What the hell does she expect? Every mail plane that lands on this ship is half full of Dear John letters. Barlow and Axe got 'em just last week."

"Barlow was dating a stripper, Ed, and would you wait for Axe? This is not the same thing. Becky is a good woman, Ed, and she loves you."

"Your one to talk about love, Senior. How many wives have you had?"

"Four, and that means I know what a bad one is like. Becky is nothing like any of my ex-wives."

"Why did she write that then? When your girl says we need to talk, it means she needs to talk, and you need to get dumped."

"She thought you might not understand. She wrote me this letter and told me only to tell you if I thought it was an emergency. I think this might qualify." He paused and looked into Ed's eyes. "Maybe she knows you better than you think." The harvest moon rose full above the ocean. Ed and the Senior Chief looked up just in time to see the silhouette of a squadron of fighters crossing its path.

"What is it?"

"Ed, Becky is pregnant. You're going to be a father."

Leaning on the cold gray rail they looked down again at the now artificially lit flight deck. As the crew moved in to help the disabled bird, a massive hydraulic jack was wheeled in and placed under the wing. The plane was jacked up, and a crewmember in a yellow shirt drove a flat truck beneath the shy landing gear. When the jack was removed the plane was slowly wheeled away, supported by the crew.

Two Men

Michael E. Roduin Sr.

Kenny Davis, positioned to the north of his enemy, hunkered down behind the large brown boulder for cover. His chocolate chip uniform was clean and pressed to the satisfaction of Marine Corp standards. The creases stood out tall, and the light layer of dust was from this morning. He had had his new sergeants stripes sewn onto the collar, by the company tailor, the night before.

Forcing himself against the gray green desert moss he reloaded his M-16. He put his hand on the cross carved into the barrel, paused, and leapt up to fire off half a dozen blind rounds at his enemy to the south. The bullets sent shards of rock flying through the barren land.

As quickly as he leapt up, he receded back to his position. Pausing, he listened for movement of any kind. Years of training would come down to this day. He would live or die, only two possibilities here on this field. He forced his senses into high gear, feeling the air, smelling the blood, and tasting the death, all the while listening for anything; hoping to hear nothing.

Akbar Jahlamur, the soldier to the south, wore a ratted and torn uniform that was two sizes too big. He pulled his feet in close as bullets shattered against the rocks all around him. He looked at his bolt-action rifle; the machine pressed letters on the stock were all in Russian. It was getting hotter. Jahlamur knew that his darker complexion would protect him from the sun. He doubted if the American could last more than an hour.

He pressed himself tight against his own rock and peered out to the south, out into his country. The war had been going on for two years now. It had not been a quick victory for Allah like they told him it would be. For the last six months the armies had been locked in a stalemate. Soldiers were dying while bureaucrats and attorneys made a profit. He wondered if he would ever get home to see his wife and kids again. He missed them, and he missed his home.

It wouldn't be home if I wasn't here, he thought. This army had come to change his way of life. They came to change his country, his government, and his home. At first he was reluctant. He had never been a violent man, and was not ready to take up arms for this Bin Laden character. He followed the six pillars of Islam, and preached for peace. When his country was invaded he prayed that Allah would bring a quick resolution.

Three months went by with no resolution in sight. The Americans occupied more and more of his country, while Bin Laden and his fighters hid among the rocks. When Bin Laden ordered a second attack on the US, it had angered the European nations and they had started an all out offensive. Bombing continued twenty-four hours a day, and American troops were stationed on every street corner.

On January 13th, Jahlamur's world changed forever. He had been out of the house all day working at the factory. He was a line supervisor, and was doing very well for himself and his family. The Americans had come into his home, taken one of his sons, and executed him in the street. They claimed he was a rebel. He was twelve years old.

The next day he joined up with the Taliban forces and never looked back. They think they know what is right, he thought, godless fiends.

He loaded his last five rounds into his rifle and prayed to his god. Let me know what is right to do. He stroked his beard and thought again of his home. He did not, however, pause long. That could be fatal.

The desert that surrounded them was silent. The stones and sand were their only audience. The sun, climbing in the sky, began to burn hotter.

They had happened upon each other by accident. Sergeant Davis had taken a break and walked over the hill to smoke. He was out on watch post by himself, a mile from the main body of troops. He thought it was safe; they were supposed to be miles from any opposition. He had taken a stroll to keep from thinking too much.

He had been thinking about his wife. He missed her so much. She was the best cook in Walsford, Tennessee. He had been thinking what she might have for dinner tonight when he happened upon his dark skinned enemy.

He had not radioed in when he left his post. There would not be a call for him to check in. No one would know he was missing for four hours, and only then if his relief was on time.

Lieutenant Jahlamur had been meditating. He was camped nearby. Neither force knew how close the enemy was. He was sitting cross-legged when he caught the eye of the American. The sight of each other had caused an awkward blaze of bullets and rush for cover. Jahlamur positioned himself to the south, knowing that he would be better protected from the sun. Davis took a northern position, hoping his own troops would come up behind the Taliban fighter.

Davis took a long drink from his canteen. The iodine pills made it taste like rotten whisky, but if he didn't drink it, he would surely die. He listened as his enemy loaded rounds into his own weapon. He can't be more than twenty yards away, he thought. He took another sip, winced, and capped the bottle.

He pulled out his dog tags on which hung a crucifix and the charm of Saint Martin. He kissed Christ's feet and spoke to the emblem, "Holy Saint Martin, I know I have been asking for a lot lately, but if you could help me out

just one more time. If you could just get me out of here I guarantee I will give you the biggest feast you ever saw on your day. It's been almost a year since your last celebration, but we have not forgotten that your day is coming soon. Please just get me out of here so I can see my wife and kids."

Wiping the sweat from his face and looking up at the sun he knew he must act soon. He could not handle it out here, without cover, for a full day. He would be dead by sundown.

His thoughts ran back to his wife. The day the planes hit the trade center he had quit his job at Target and signed up for the United States Marine Corps. She had not wanted him to. She begged him to let others protect the country. "They need me over there," he told here.

"I need you here. Your kids need you here."

"If I don't do this, who will?"

"I don't care, I don't want to lose you."

"I can't stand aside and just let this happen."

"Why not?"

"I just can't. There are people that I can help and I am going to help them. You married me because you loved that about me. What has changed now?"

"Nothing has changed. I still love you for it. I love you because you would risk your life for what you believe in. I don't, however, want you to die."

Pulling his arms out of his rucksack, he carefully, quietly, slowly peeked out around the rock that was his shield. He looked past his enemy toward the beautiful desert fields. He did not stare long though; the scene wouldn't be nearly as pleasant if it were covered with his blood.

At the same time, Jahlamur peeked over his own stone. Their eyes locked together. Both men stood stone still, sizing the other up, looking for a weakness. Both men reached for their weapons, stood, and fired. The air screamed with

bullets and flashed with fire. The sound of war cracked the desert silence. The rounds sparked and flashed on the desert stones. Both men ducked back behind their cover, each checking himself for holes; not one round had hit its intended mark.

Davis ejected the empty clip from his weapon and refreshed it with new rounds. Twelve left, he thought, twelve more shots to take him out. Now is the time. I need all the advantage I can get. He readied himself, dumping the remainder of his gear into a pile on the ground.

"I'm gonna kill you, you fucking heathen bastard. Allah can't save your worthless piece of shit ass now," he screamed into the desert. "Do you hear me you Arab faggot?"

Jahlamur heard the words, but he could grasp no meaning. He knew only one American word, chocolate. When he was a boy, relief workers had come to the city to fix the water system. People had been getting sick and dying, and these men claimed they knew why. They had been working near his home and one of the men gave him a large brown bar. "It's chocolate," the man had told him. Akbar remembered the word.

He pulled his pistol from its holster. The rifle had run out of bullets. I will kill you for my family. I will kill you for my wife. I will kill you for Allah. Screw you and your American chocolate."

"Hula budie cadii fron go nedeyea forom coot chocolate," was all the American heard. He checked his weapon two, three, four times, ensuring everything was right. Placing his hand on his chest he clutched the crucifix and prayed, with his eyes wide open, to his own god. He prayed for enlightenment, for speed, and for mercy. He checked his rifle again and steadied himself on his feet, still crouched behind the rock.

"You're gonna die. You hear me, rag head? I'm gonna blow your fucking

head off, you worthless piece of God hating shit!"

Again, the lieutenant did not understand. He knew from the tone, however, that he was not being asked over for dinner. "You Americans think you are so good. You know why your building fell down? Because America sucks, that is why."

Both men popped up again. They moved as though a mirror stood between them. Twelve rounds went off from a long rifle, and ten from a pistol. The hot molten steel hit no flesh. Not a drop of blood was spilled under the hot desert sun. Their blind haste had wasted their best chances of survival. Both men paused, and then dove behind the natural barriers that separated them.

God has saved me.

Allah has been merciful.

Jahlamur pulled a photograph from his pocket. It was of his wife and oldest son. It was faded and worn, but there was no hint of a loss of love in their eyes. He looked skyward and asked Allah for forgiveness. Again he jumped up.

This time they leapt out from behind their protection, exposing themselves to the world and their immediate enemy. They both stopped and stared across the sixty feet to the man who would mean life or death to him. Four thin muscular forearms flexed with anger; four eyes saw only blood red. Two hungry stomachs turned loops; four legs burned, waiting to move. The two men stood staring. The two men stood scared.

Davis grabbed his rifle by the barrel and hurled it at his enemy. Jahlamur threw his pistol with all his might. The two weapons, appearing in slow motion to the men, struck together in mid air with a wild metallic clang, and fell to the ground.

The men shouted a bath of curse words at one another. Jahlamur threw his canteen, Davis his helmet. Both missed. Jahlamur picked up a rock and tossed it, hitting Davis in the leg. "Hah," he shouted with his eyes wide open and

a gaping grin.

"AHHH." They charged at each other. The sixty, fifty-nine, fifty-eight feet of brown red dust and stone was not a safe place to be. Davis tore of his uniform top and tossed it at his enemy's face; Jahlamur threw the money from his pocket. Screaming at each other they approached like two speeding trains. Jahlamur drew two long curved knives from his belt; Davis pulled a massive, straight blade from his boot, and the entrenching tool from his belt. Closing at blinding speed the two screaming locomotives collided in a huge crash. Dust flew up as they fell, fighting for their homes, their countries, their lives, to the ground.

One soldier swung and missed. The other returned with a solid blow. Hot blood dripped onto the desert sand. One swung, the other kicked, one stabbed, the other ducked. The fury of blows and parries was a terribly beautiful sight. They exchanged blow after blow in a masterful display, each practiced in his art.

At last he struck the deathblow, a knife in the gut of his opponent. He saw the eyes, the realization, and felt the warm blood trickle down his thumb and across his wrist. He watched as the dark red drips became a bright flowing stream. The stream ran down the sand into a growing lake of red death. Death would ride on this stream and take away his enemy.

Why has my god not protected me?

He looked up, the painful blade in his gut, and searched the eyes of his enemy, the man who had killed him. Was that sadness he saw there? Was it fear? He looked down at the wound. He would not see his home. He would not see his children. He would not see his wife. He would not leave the battlefield triumphant or unharmed. He would not return to his tent and eat a poor substitute for a meal. He would not talk of his friends and tell stories of this day. No more would he breathe this damned desert air. His god had forsaken him and he had lost. No breath left in his lungs, he prayed silently. Collapsing against the other man he

peered out across the desert, waiting for the light.

Slowly, quietly, honorably, they died there. They fell into each other, and the dead weight of one supported the other. Their bodies leaned upon each other forming a statue of death. The sun, now on its downward slope would soon spread their image across miles of sand, cacti, and desert weeds.

Mother Thersa

Leslie Moses

I was at the express checkout line just getting some cereal. One item qualified me to be in that line but the woman in front of me had at least thirty. I looked up at the dim lit '12 items or less' sign and sighed. This-this wasn't right.

The woman had a baby, a small newborn facing me from the back of the buggy in his little car seat. He screamed with raining eyes and little nostrils that flared so far up that I thought they would fly away. The baby's lungs were healthy and he showed me he could scream even louder when he noticed someone was actually listening. Watery eyes, flared nostrils and now his little coffee colored arms reached up towards me begging to be held. And I thought about it, really I did. I almost unbuckled the child to cradle it in my arms. It would no doubt quit crying then and he would grow up to be a loved child with a promising future and be a doctor or lawyer or whatever job all babies start out being and end up hating.

"Man be quiet! I'm right here!" If I did it real fast I could swoop the whole car seat up and take the baby home and wipe those wet eyes and hold that baby till he was asleep. Oh those little arms! He kept crying and the woman he would later know as mom turned around again. "Shhhhhhhh! I'm right here!" I felt the nostrils flare and an instant bond

with junior was formed.

And then an unconscious "You wanna come home with me?" flew out of my mouth. Oops. The woman turned around again and this time she talked to me.

"He's scared of you, why you think he's crying?"

I felt the mercury inside me hit the top of my glass dome but I took a deep breath and counted to ten in Russian and then yelled, "He's crying because he thinks you got too many groceries to be in this aisle."

Oh, this was dumb. The fierce comments we exchanged overlapped with boiling anger. But she totally out-worded me and when the dust cloud cleared the woman and baby were gone and the cashier was sweeping my cereal across the scanner. Yep, I was saving the world, one child at a time, but you know these things take practice.

Sad Story

Sarah Beth Link

What a common name: Sarah. I hate it. So now I go by Sarah Beth, a bit more original. My great aunt's name is Sarah; I suppose I was named after her. Sad story. She's a chain-smoking liar who tries to act like she likes me when she hugs me hello after not seeing me for years.

Sarah means princess. Sarah should be a rare name, only used for the flowers among the thistles. There are too many girls whose parents named them a name that's supposed to make them feel pretty. It could mean pretty on the inside, bologna. To be a "princess" is to be enchantingly beautiful and elegant, wearing pretty gowns. At least that's what the stories tell little girls who want to be princesses. I wanted to feel that way so that I could own my name, just for a second. Now snobby girls have defeated the meaning of princess by wearing shirts that say, "I'm a princess." Like being stuck on yourself will make you that way.

One time I spent a whole day getting ready, getting prissed up, being oh so girlie. This lady who giggled like a chipmunk and looked much better than me (even though she's a mom), did my hair and put on my make-up. I put on make-up sometimes, but not how she did it. I got fake nails that made me almost helpless. I had to ask Aaron to open my pop. I put on pantyhose that made me an inch smaller all around; I guess that's the point. I put on a white dress that made

my body look curvy, more womanly than it really is. I wore pearls. So what if they aren't really real, they look that way. For the first time, I looked in the mirror slightly surprised.

The moment he saw me, he wispered, "You look beautiful." Except this time I believed that he meant it. Even though he told me a hundred times. Each of those times I would look down to the right and say meekly "Thank you." Even though I thought it was a lie. Every time I felt like saying, "You're full of crap." But that would hurt his feelings, and I wouldn't want to do that. This time I smiled. When we took pictures, little Benjamin thought we looked like we were getting married. Later, his grandfather, whom I have made my own, went home and cried. What made a grown man cry?

A few days later I went to the office to pick up my pictures from the dance. I told her my name. She pulled out the pictures, looked at them and said, You're not Sarah." As if to say, you don't look like a princess. Nor do you belong with this charming prince. "I am Sarah. That's me in the picture." She glanced back down, shook her head hesitantly, ever so slightly. I blurted out "yes." My face was starting to get hot. I waited as she studied my face for a second that felt like an hour. Even if she thought it wasn't me, what does it matter? Why would I want to steal anyone else's pictures? I was embarrassed. I wanted to scream at her and snatch my pictures from her hand. Then she handed them over. No, I'm not a princess. I'm ordinary, even though all the other girls got all girlied up too.

Now I'm at the house that belongs to a worn out woman who still looks young, but is tired inside. She still laughs with a light heart, but her children have made her skin run dry. Her little girl, who reminds me of myself, holds my light brown hair as she tries to sleep. My hair used to be golden and curly. I see myself in a place like this, strapped down by a big husband who doesn't help, who doesn't appreciate me, who doesn't make me feel like a princess. I have this

urgency to run free, but I'm not there yet. I haven't chosen that way. I won't. He won't... be like that.

"Dee-ah," the little girl calls to me, her little mouth can't say my name. I've awoke from my daymare. I should be named Deah. That's an odd name. It doesn't quite fit in, or make any sense, like me. I could make up my own meaning. Then I could own my name that isn't oridinary, American, and dull. That cancels out any meaning it has, by meaning something extraordinary. Deah would fit me.

Poetry

I - 95

Emily Joost

My comrades and I found him as we turned off of 84 and onto 95 south. He sat on the gravel patch at the edge of the on ramp using his worn tan satchel, which appeared the texture of weathered skin, as a seat. He seemed to be the sterotypical drifter. "Where you headed?" he inquired gruffly as we slowed to debate the situation

"Jacksonville," we chimed.

"That's some luck, I heard there's work down that way." We just shrugged, I'm sure he would have been headed to Alaska if thats where we were going. The three of us looked at each other. Our brand-new, black, borrowed pick-up gleamed.

"Why not? We'll throw him in the back," our GI said. We nodded and told him to jump in. We reasoned that if we were stuck in the sun of a Georgia on ramp, we'd want someone to pick us up too.

He jumped in and rode the full three hours making small talk through the cab window. When we stopped for a burger our GI, the groups protector, even bought him a beer. Funny how the military makes boys feel invincible.

He laughed as we made semis honk and waved at cars with out of state plates. I'm sure he could have told us a story worth retelling, but he didn't and we didn't ask. We were content to let our imaginations wander the states with a worn leather satchel.

Forsyth Park February 28 2001

Emily Joost

He sat on
a bench, arms out
stretched, resting
on the top rung,
bedrole beside
him, red t-shirt bulging
above the belt, black
jacket with unbottoned
cuffs flapping, ankles
crossed over worn steel
toed boots.
staring
straight forward, inhaling
the smell of a paper
mill city,
crystal coal skin glistening,
watching,
just like yesterday
and tomorrow,

welcoming the morning.

18

Ryan Clark

The disdainful shadows flicker,
flicker even as I stare;
I perceive the cold surround me
drawing me unaware.

Thoughts transcend astral planes,
thoughts of past connections,
of questions regarding me as sane
in dire need of protection.

Attempts to embrace the collective known
leaves me tired and cold,
a consciousness left resurrection shown
to me futility told.

Forsaken by wraiths and shade
dancing upon my head,
will I experience life again,
or am I already dead?

32

Ryan Clark

The rain last night was phenomenal
The view from the dock serene
The clouds formed like entities above me
with corridors through time being seen

Luck I feel having seen this
About mine eyes they protrude
The birth of the storm is in front of me
Like a ship just a little askew.

The drops came down with passion
as we sought the dock house for now
Wanting to be part of nature
Enduring the wet coming down.

From the porch the scene is beautiful
Darkness masking light from within
How lucky I feel having seen this
A part of God to me on a whim.

a mazing mouse

Jeanette Kehr

my whiskers
turn down this way
no right
should I turn
left ok
clickity click
ooh my bell-ee
hunga-r-ee! So-oo dizzy
long gray walls so-oo high
know the
sliver of ch-ee-eesse is
oh, yea
it's this way
ooh white coat
just tell
me save me the time
tickity tick
I am so-oo hungry
last time
tick tick
had chee-z
so-oo dizzy
and tired and
dizz-ee
plee-z tell me
which way

ok I'm going right

and right

again

yum, sniff

now left

how long has it

been

tick tick

I did it yesterday

tick tick

I have to remember

it was there yesterday

the chees-z

at the end

yea it was yesterday

tick tick

one more right then

another left

it's time

tick tick

clickity click

Ooh! White Coat!

Plee-z!

Yes!

Chee-z!

A Past Left Undone

Ryan Clark

Rain . . . plummeting through the corridors of her heart,
weeping from fountains of gray shade,
glissading across empty walls of joy,
redemption of a scathed path made.

The truth of shame as a cloak
she through hours of saturated pain,
minutes askew as she soaks
in her seconds described as sane.

Her dim light glimmers for future love
seeking not a shallow comfort through temptation,
silently awaiting her chance for love
as she yearns . . . only for vindication.

Birthday Poem 1998

(for Marcus)

Melissa Hill

You know that I do not want to exist here anymore
in this Fallen world of literature and history
where we try to build an exit,
fly above the pain and rage,
the ignorant and the elite.
Do you look towards the stars and remember
a time when they were not so far away,
a time when the moon turned
on an axis we could reach?

We dance through this world with tears in our eyes,
weeping for the love, grace and innocence
we threw away so casually.
I miss it now, and see a remnant of my former light
in the sideways glance of cancerous eyes,
and I smoke too much
and I drink too much
and I don't feel enough—
I carve my youth in rusty razorblades
and leave scars for your concern to trace
as I sing Happy Birthday
to all the souls delivered on this day:
This is the day of the dreaming dead,
and I give you a prophecy,

and I cry you a vision—
All these things are yours, I say—
can you believe in me?

I know I am always leaving, hoping for the right key
to the right door,
a return to my summer Eden
when the birds sang their soul for me—
all this, and nothing more.
I cannot believe in me,

But if this poem were a door and I could step through
into a world where things made sense
and words weren't hollow,
where love and betrayal
didn't spin in the same iris,
where the sun would shine and leave no blisters
where I could dance without crying
in all the fires of remembrance,
I would leave it open for you.

Drinking Her

Melissa Hill

Scars that sang to weeping willows
As I lay naked by the riverside,
Mud that covered the cycles of shame
And the sweet water that washed it all away-
This was my river Jordan,

Downstream from my grandmother's grave.

Today she lives inside the mud,
A crawling thing that slithered past my open eyes
While I was blind inside my rage.

Sometimes I am sick with the taste of it, the smell
That drove me to the river's edge,
Where on my knees I drank the water
Though it smelled and tasted of cancer,
The destruction inherent to her name,
Her story, her sadness, her sickness-
There I lost my touch, the knack of pity.
My grief slid through my open hands,
And quickly, though quietly, drowned.

I never saw my reflection; the water moves
Too fast, and speaks in tongues that leave
Me confused and trembling, sounding, as they do,
Like her. But I saw her face
Crawling the length of a cottonmouth snake,
And once again, I was the intruder,

And I sang, Jericho, Jericho,
Your walls are thicker than I remember,
And the trumpets louder inside my soul.

Finite Blue Eyes

Sarah Beth Link

trembling hands
dig for meaning
You already know
ungrateful untrusting
You see behind a
cover page written
where can I hide?
whisper forgiven
with love, the Cross
broken by mercy
tears dangle from
finite pale eyes
You hold me

Honey

Melissa Hill

This city kills me while I sleep.

Honeysuckle hands extend
fingers to the fading light, creep
through curtains and, ever inward,
steal like knives to my dreaming eyes,
as the weeping willow tree
taps out a rhythm on my shade,
with all his hearts spread seven ways
from Hell and sometimes
only brushing the glass in the windowpane.

This is what I can dream
when I am alone in this opium den:

The scent of oak, of freshly mown grass,
the dimness of this murderous house,
leaving me locked inside the honeysuckle tube,
with only a sparkle of my sugar water left
to refract, combine, and welcome the light,
vibrating on the tip of the stamen that becomes this city,
that steals my eyes and leaves me blind.

Morning Rush

Andy Wilharm

The breeze is rolling off the crashing waves;
It's cold and salty under darkened skies.
Approaching weather from the sea behaves
as builder; thus titanic waves arise.

Increasing gusts of wind are blasting sand
against the backs of patient, local men,
who wait to worship sea, as some do land,
who gave up a full sleep, to join their kin.

The sun is not sight, but lights' present.
The groups of people fade into the spray,
await the chance to ride the first crescent,
forgetting all but waves and wasting day.

The sky is gray, the water turns out rough,
but these few surfers cannot get enough.

One More Day

Jeanette Kehr

Inside my head the memory
of Van Gogh's "Starry
Night" bleeds through the wall
across my room, waving its swirly broad strokes
of saffron and blue. Through my Window,
my mind floating,
I applaud the narrow steeple cutting
through the swirling sky.
My thin sick blood drips
narrowly into
the clicking
machine
returning, dripping
then re-entering
my body. My eyes close
shutting off the fluorescent
lights and I enter a red tiled parlor.
Chocolate icecream swirls dripped
with nuts and a single red cherry
nestles high upon my rootbeer float.
A young counter girl narrowed
blue-black eyes gazing, plucks the stem
then click
her nails on the counter.
My head tips back, my mouth applauds
the red cherry as it narrowly
enters my throat, floating

through my stomach. From far away I hear
the quieting swirl of the machine as it's counting
my heart beats,
click one.
click two.
click three.
Clicking
so on
and so on. Outside my window,
Van Gogh's "Starry Night,"
is becoming clearer, his broadening
strokes float counter clockwise
and the piercing steeple
stabs at me
and the stars drip upon my blood
swirling
round and round
as my heart pounds
keeping the beat for one more day.

Pecking Order

Jeanette Kehr

The seed I planted several springs ago, sprung
into a lazy daisy that droops
for the plump bumble bee
collector of nectar, and overhead
is the little brown sparrow, chirping, high upon the sagging bough,
as my yellow-orange tabby crouches on all fours,
creeping with his claws, padding on his paws, and spread out upon
his belly, his eyes glazing over, shoulders still
as my spindly legged mutt sniffs the bush
the pavement, the flowers, and then
my yellow-orange tabby, and still
the little brown sparrow is chirping high upon the
sagging bough
until,
the roar of the four wheeler accelerates
and the little brown sparrow
flies
away

Possession is 180 *Proof*

Jeanette Kehr

I drive my mouth to your fiery flame—pain
sleeps. Burning, scorching interior flesh
fervor to my exterior—you gain
solemn faith. My core is safe—you refresh.
Sweetly potent over me I witness
you, sweet bronze liquor, waiting to bargain
with me. Glazed stare, I crave to confess
to you, Oh Vial! You are my only kin.
Ashen flesh embodies my need, Oh Flame!
can my eyes be crossroads to your prison?
I beg you! Don't burden me with your shame!
Your sting too intense, but my hand—risen!
Can you, my sweet kin, fix me or replace
your difference to the life I face?

Red Shades

Sarah Beth Link

staple my incisions with cheap
words you freely toss
when they rust
poison permeates me
red shades onto your eyes
aren't quite enough
to dampen the dull ache
pulsing in my head
I'm sorry—you say
one more wound
ruptures

Sense

Richard DiPirro

I
    smoked cannibus
        in Saudi Arabia
twice.

Six of us sat
    and smoked
        somewhat silently

I was scared that
    someone would smell
        the sweet aroma.

"So what?" One Sergeant said.

Some friend sent the substance
    stuck stealthfully in seven pages
        he wrote.

Some serious friend . . .

After we smoked,
    we were stoned—
        we sang and said some stupid stuff.

We laughed and wished the sun
would stay
fast asleep.

So that
we wouldn't see
the sand.

And wouldn't have to stand
as some sentry on
some shithole spot.

Someone said
this was the best of their stay
in Saudi Arabia.

I say
it still
sucked.

The Attempt

Emily Joost

"Now and then it is good to pause in the pursuit of happiness and just be happy."

-Anonymous

The light burst
through the tiny panes of crisscrossed
glass, making the slated wood floor a jigsaw
of color and shadow.
A lone cloud scooted across the sky,
darkening Talmadge Bridge.
I sat on my cushion, pulled off
of the couch and up
to the window to expose
myself to the light.
I patiently tried to reason through
M. Scott Peck, but the view kept
catching my attention and drawing
it outside to how the sun
reflected, making the landscape
burst with color.
The pansies cushioned the azaleas
and the dwarf sunflowers acted as a bridge
between tall and small.
I again attempted to focus on The Road Less Traveled
and to push away the cloud
of ignorance, MY original sin.
When my patience stumbled,
my attention turned to the light

reflecting off of the swirling
river water, the cloudy
color of granite. It ran
around, but never seemed to get
anywhere it hadn't already
been.

Once more I focused between Peck's
covers, this time distracted
by a different sense. The city's aroma crept
up through the oaks and moss
to my fourth story perch, so I paused
to inhale the busy smell of
magnolia and hot pavement.
I know the logical reason
why my quest should press on,
but the wind, natures fingertips,
brushes my hair and makes me forget.
I will try
again tomorrow. Today, I will
sit on my cushion,
watch the bridge,
and enjoy the light.

The Price of Gas These Days

Brian Hansen

The blister-blackened bodies of Baghdad's burning babies; faces frozen in silent scream
Unholy memories I try to suppress as I pursue the "American Dream"

But I've been to the battlefield altar and watched the blood flow freely
Into sand, through pipelines, to gas pumps, to power new S.U.V.s

While CNN painted their pretty pictures with pixels of night-vision green
I witnessed cease-fire slaughters and learned about the "Machine"

And now at weekly worship at the shrine of BP or Shell
I help finance a national addiction that is leading us straight into hell

For we all know we are killing our Mother as we leech this black milk from inside her
Yet we slick back our beaches and choke on the fumes as the rift in the heavens grows wider

this child of mine

Jeanette Kehr

sprightly spurns his showers—never a drop
renders him wet he uses the toilet for
target practice
but in his bed
bullseye!

Dripping his syrup
all butterfingers—the milk takes flight
his face butterfly nectar
sweet
sticky.
Legs long—lean writhing lasso
harnessed muscle
he is a renaissance masterpiece

he squats on his heels and peers over
the dead beetle—cries for its
mommy—look upstairs—no worry—
God is his neighbor—
zealous hands dictate his day—his voice
surrenders to the silly cat in the hat—zoom
he stumbles.

His eyes caress buttery daffodils outside his window—dash
he plucks all
—but one
avoiding Mr. Spider
his mommy might cry.

Westside Urban Health Center

Richard DiPirro

flakes of chipped red paint
around clouds of commiseration
children's kids smiling—teeth missing
they don't know they're beaten yet
down the clinic

dirty holes in second-hand clothes
draped over bent metal folding-chairs
cough cough cough and a spray of hachoo
waiting for hours for a ten minute visit
down the clinic

criminal loud program on trash t.v.
pretty people with perfect lives
grandma laughs but there's no one around
plastic plants smell like fluorescence
down the clinic

a husband wakes up and ties his old wife's shoes
waiting a whole life with a fractured rib
she shuffles off to x-ray land, and he
eats a dry bun from a Sunbeam bag
down the clinic

crochet needles and a world of cellulite

fuzzy gray house-shoes slap-slap

anyone dressed well is a salesman

come in sick and you walk out crazy

down the clinic

Without this Ring

Jeanette Kehr

Your elastic union, I won't excuse.
My reluctance, my second thoughts, I pour
to the floor, I glide. I will refuse

to be the token you assumed, I amuse.
Instead, I pirouette through the church door,
your elastic union I won't excuse.

I prance down the aisle, a pivoting ruse,
it is your good intention I adore,
but to the floor I glide. I will refuse,

to be an extension of your paying dues.
It is your indiscretion, I forgive no more.
Your elastic union, I won't excuse.

For your dancing with someone else, I choose
not to forgive you, instead I will soar
to the floor. I glide. For I will refuse

to be the perfect hand, you want to subdue.
I have no mercy, for that is a chore.
An elastic union, I won't excuse.
To the floor I glide, and I can't refuse.

Witness

Melissa Hill

Light shines where no wave breaks,
The dark god tossing his restless curses to the shore,
To a man who cries, "This is not my world,"
As he takes each pulse of water into his veins;
The stars are going nova in his mind,
One by one exploding like hate
At a forty-five degree angle to the spark
That tried to be the way and the light.

With his starry night, his dark mad water, and
His hateful gaze, who will witness his strange ways?

Nine nails, he says, were cast from the fisher's net,
Two hundred shells washing to the sand—
Their grooves spin under his clockwork ways,
And push him towards the sea.
His witnesses crawl on five-barred legs,
From sightless caves to descend on rocks,
Holding the salt of Lethe just out of his reach.

Waves break where no light shines,
Madness building walls that have learned to wait
For the man crying, "This is not my world,"
As he sinks down and surrenders his death,
In waves of gold, a dark red hue,
His breath, his blood, leaving stars of air, rising
To the surface—(Witnesses as they burst)—washing
Into space on miles of empty light.

missionary on broad street

John DeLong

on the corner paces
 a madman—fervent,
 screaming
with

the voice of god

(screaming)
to the dead that
zig-and-zag to

avoid

him—on the way to work
and class and coffee and lunch and
and

god knows where

with this look,
this look, like
somebody farted.

but still he screams,
through the clouds cluttering the sun and crowds of sheep terrified of salvation
and the consequences of all their actions
and into the night wet

with all the baptismal
glory of october rains.

i always laughed but tithed
with change or a smoke or

ten minutes of time.

i tried to tell him:
    fuck the lost
    get a damned shower.

but he just smiled and screamed and puffed on the cigarette and
paced around
on the filthy sidewalk.

one-thirty a.m. on south carolina two-twenty-four

John DeLong

a ghost
    (slipping over the
    ice and water
    and asphalt like
a shadow)
listening to some old
country and western
    (like conway twitty
    or hank williams
    or that long haired

hippie my daddy hated
cause he was a long haired
hippie and all his songs
had drums like african tribals
(but i liked it—the pulsating the throbbing the
smooth-rough pound-sound of stick slapping skin
and some good ole boy wailing
about baby havin' her blue-jeans on)
)
.

like my father did.

i pretend he is here with me. laughing and telling me we still have twelve more hours to drive so just relax and you just took a pee twenty minutes ago at the rest stop so don't let me hear that.

outside is
black and starry
(that new moon promise
little light and more
implications than
i care to deal with
(given this cold—outside
is like frozen dirt that
caves in slow on all
sides of this
cheap metal coffin)
)
.

down a highway that begins in the middle of nowhere and ends in the middle of nowhere, in search of answers in the form of questions in the form of places that

I've never seen—looking for places i can't get back—out of reach

now.

(coyote is laughing in the woods
all around. howling in appreciation
of some joke he started some twenty years
before that's punchline is still a long ways off.)

but maybe i'll be okay this time. maybe i'll be okay this time.
(i say as i light my lucky and watch

the ghosts of silent indians and runaway slaves and truckers
fly by.)

on warning labels and invitations

Michelle Woodson

instructions lost on the air near my ears)(just under the tounge and don't don't don't unless you want this person in your head for a multitude of days/ unintentional family/ things look truer black and white typed, thin scrawls and its all just what someone decided to say /someone decided to say don't so I did/ some intense connection un cunt ain able there exists a fine line between my eyes and the back of my skull so I invited you in in so thin in/ spin a mind is a terrible thing to taste tornado flavor/ yours was faster, but did you really? have you ever? no, I don't think. suppose had it been important you'd have told me twice/ alone I held head high through that mirror maze test phaze and passed the flying eye exam finally free perfpaper headtree and fuck the surgeon general I'm smoking a drum and not thinking of you at all

Sunday

Michelle Woodson

chocolip implications I'm radiating Friday in your
left ear
something too soft that closes /inon/
those tiniest bones in there
somewhere
I ask about the drums, want to drink their
rhythms
fingertip shotglass
we'd been alive on this planet
like two piles of days till
I tripped on your bottom lip
and all my pages fell /out of/
ctrl
you kiss my neck because it's there
let my mouth start fires on hipskin
say I make you feel like lesbian
wants to start them everywhere
slow bake mind steam
you hold my breath till I'm dizzying
we/still
until the day of rest and praise
lost in this skinescape
in bed for two days

Trove

for Zora, too, but mostly Dave

Michelle Woodson

He said I'd never write because
I'm too busy
living

and I wanted to kick
his smiling teeth in.

still, I can't decide
which one of us
is angrier

and if I really want
to kiss his smiling—

or

more simply
to crack him open like some
hopeful oyster

just to see if he's all more of those
skin covered sacks of dirt
some people call food
and insist on the aphrodisiac
qualities locked
inside:

"Just let it slide down your throat,"

they say smiling that

winkable

kickable

smile.

Or

will this be the time

the persistence of dreams

insists that I hope

to twist my knife,

take a bite

and break my tooth on a pearl.

Then,

shock of bloody tooth and

dragonfly-wing jewel,

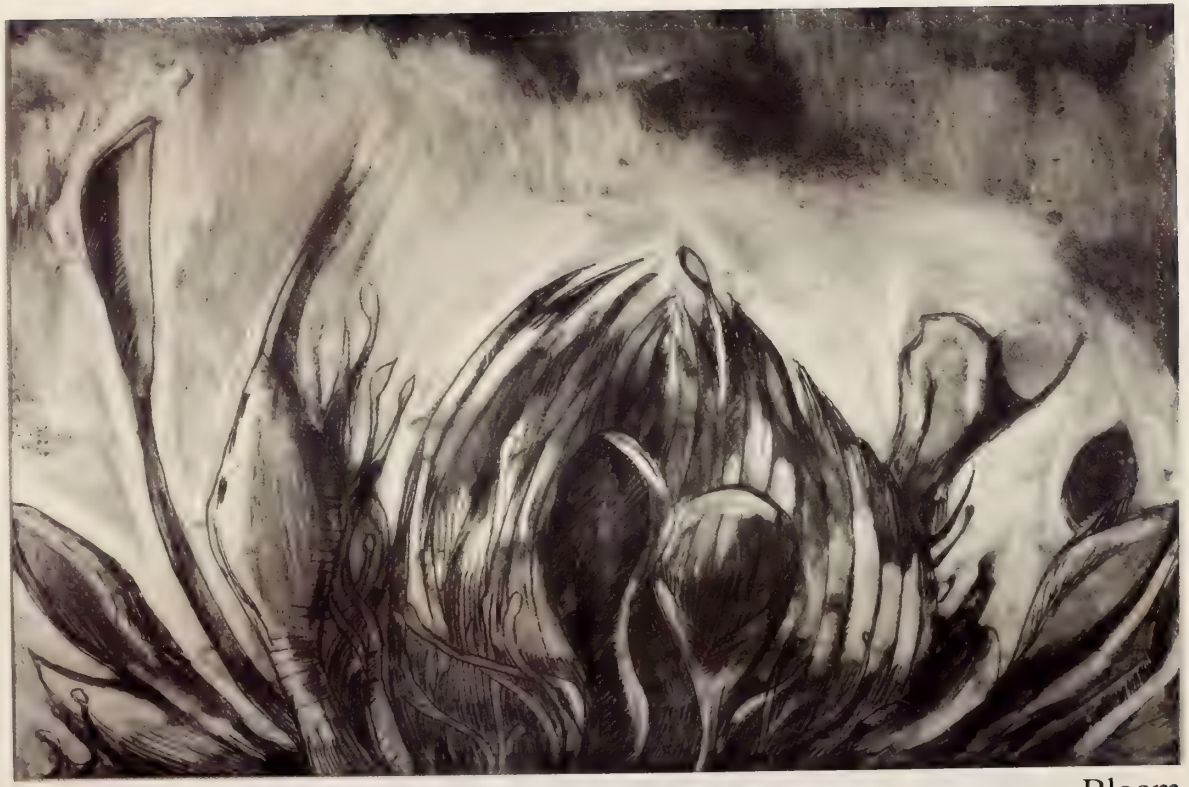
I'll spit them both out

laughing.

Art

Lighthouse View

Jane Boswell



Bloom

Al John Fontanilla

Hope

Walter Benvides

Self Portrait
Cindy Nesmith

Desire
Amy Kidane

Untitled

Nina Norton

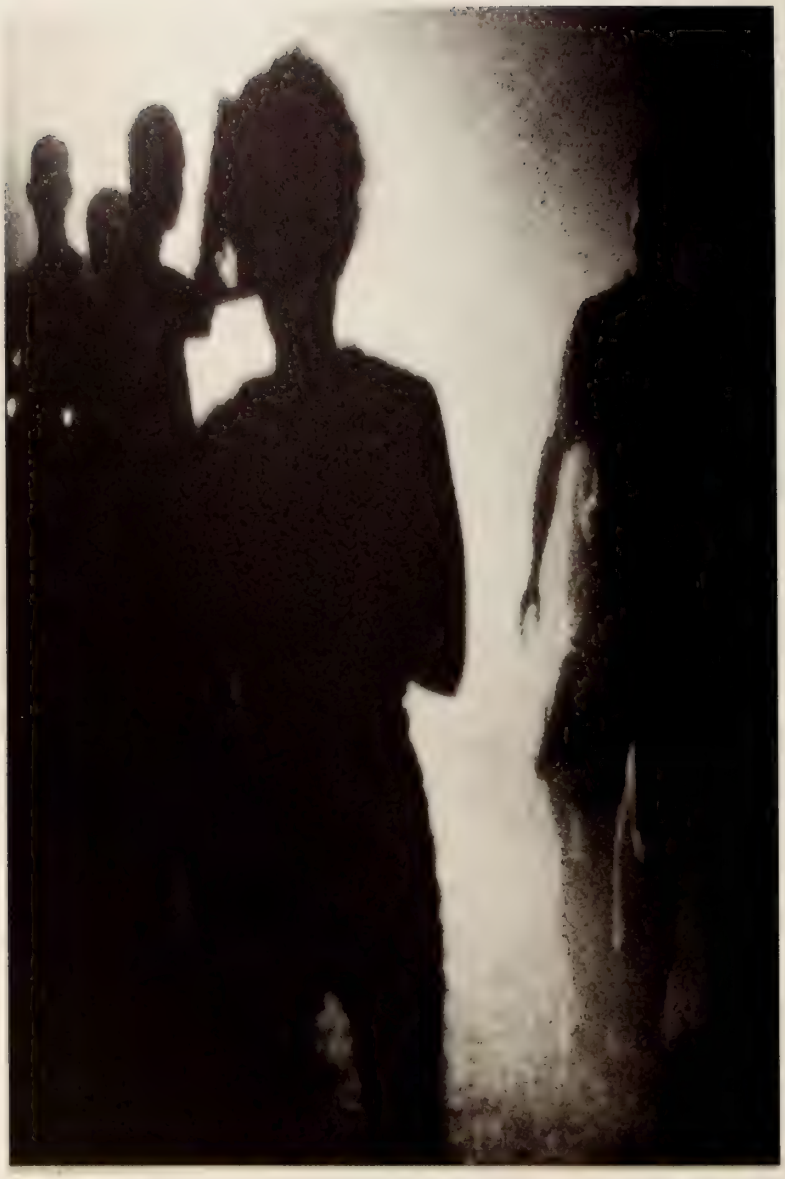
Why Me ?
Lisa Fordham

Different View

Selma Lewis

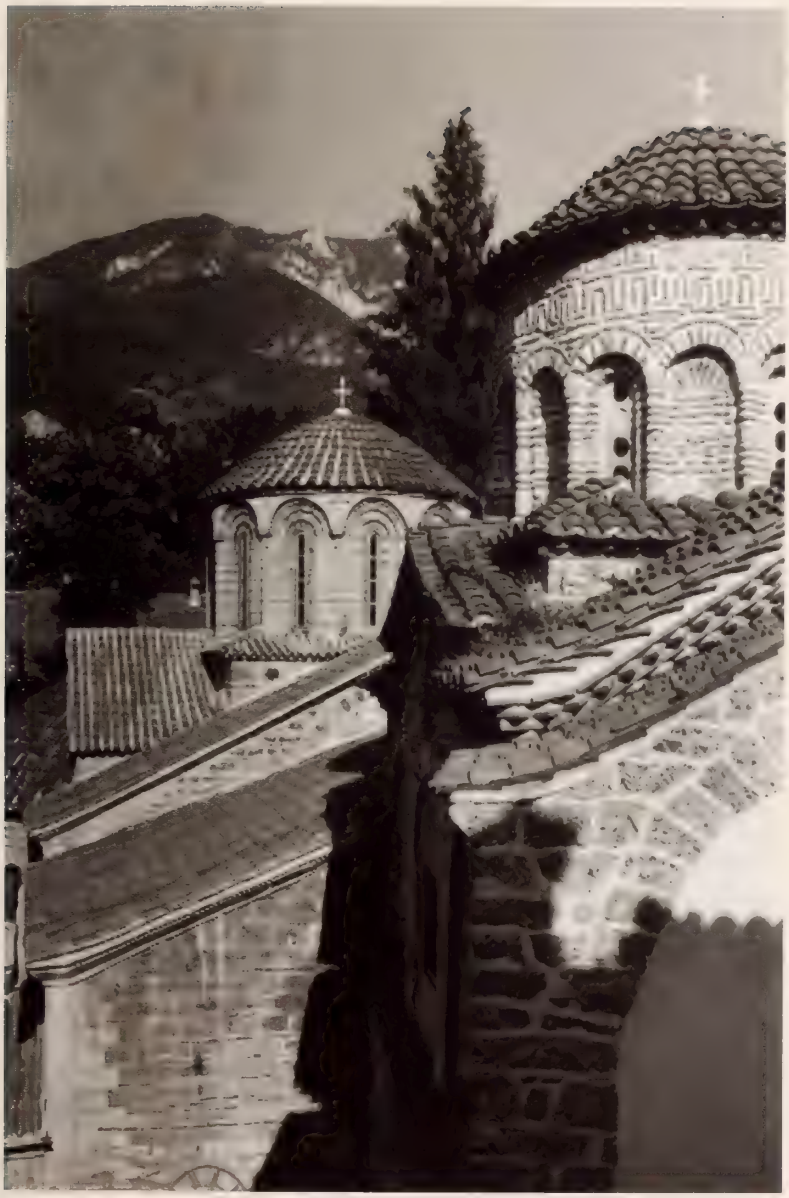
Within

Sebastian Philipp



Aliens

Nikki Baker



Untitled
Sebastian Philipp

Transformation

Al John Fontanilla

Untitled

Kitty Roberts

Joshua and Gertrude

Susanna DeMuro

My Little Pool
Joe Blankenship

Ideas Without End

Stephanie Raines

AASU

ARMSTRONG ATLANTIC
STATE UNIVERSITY

alliope

2003

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If you are a dreamer come in,
If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar,
a hope-er, a pray-er, a magic bean buyer,
If you're a pretender, come sit by my fire
For we have some flax-golden tales to spin.

- Shel Silverstein

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Naive Knew Better by Sebastian Phillip is this years recipient of the art award.

On The Cover: *Seperate is Bound* by Julian Santa-Rita.

Fiction

There's a Piano in the Creek

Sasha McBrayer

It is a pleasant day. Usually I hate how it feels out, but things are strangely mellow. I'm standing on a worn old country road. It has probably been here for a hundred years at least. Its been paved over several times since its first construction, but you can still feel the age. I feel it even more so since this street, for me, represents everything that is old. I'm standing in front of my grandmother's house. It has been my grandmother's house since my father was a boy. If I look behind me, I will see my great grandparent's house. It's here, too. And at one time my uncle lived across the field, but his second wife made him move so their fragile marriage wouldn't be so affected by his mother living ten yards away. It didn't matter much. He divorced her, then remarried her, then divorced her again. In total he has been divorced three times now between two women.

The sun is warm, but hidden enough behind fluffy, white clouds so as not to make me sweat overly much. I can feel the humidity on my face and on the back of my neck. I can feel it in my throat as I steadily breathe in the warm air. It isn't as bad as it

usually is, though. The cicadas are awake, filling my ears with their constant screeching. Though many things have changed since my childhood, cicadas still frighten me. Have you ever seen a cicada's shell? They are thick, hearty little insects, the size of a small walnut, who make an awful racket all summer and shed their skin. I've never seen a live cicada, but I have found their lifeless shells and each one gives me a chill.

The big white house behind me is exactly the same. There are new owners living there now who don't even know me. They don't know that I swam in their pool once, or that I ate dinner in their living room. They don't know that my grandma lives across from them or that my great grandparents live right next door. They don't realize that the little tomato garden only inches from their property is tended daily by my great grandpa and that I've eaten a few tomatoes from there. They also do not know that there's a girl standing in the road in front of their house planning to do some questionable things.

I cross the narrow street to stand on my grandmother's porch. There are cobwebs everywhere. This is nothing new. I think the biggest spider I ever saw had a web here one summer. The huge bushes gave her plenty of shade to hide in. There's an old porch swing that's always been here, too. I would sit in it and contemplate what it is I'm about to do, but it's covered with dust. And who knows, there might be a cicada or spider -- waiting there to get me.

As I examine the porch I see the mailbox where I've gotten some of my own mail. Yes, my parents and I called this home for a time, two separate instances. What kind of a grown man moves his family into his mother's house? I'll never know. . . I remember the first time we stayed here for more than just a visit. I was in third grade and everyone was beginning to think there was something wrong with me because I could not remember my address or telephone number. None of them had the slightest clue that it was no problem with my memory, but rather my will. I did not want to remember it. To remember it would mean it was true. This place. . . was my home.

My grandmother isn't home. I've made sure of that. Now is my chance. I MUST be insane, but all I feel is anger. If I don't do something about it, channel some of this negative energy, I'll just explode. I've never felt this way before. I have to do this.

I know exactly where my grandma hides the extra key. It has been in the same place since my dad was a boy. I have to stand on an old chair to reach it, but I get it, and I open the door. As I enter, so many memories hit me. It has only been five years since my last visit to this place, but suddenly it seems like it has been longer. I can remember my cousin chasing me around on this slick floor in his superman PJ's. I remember third grade, when I brought home tons of books for homework every night and my back hurt

from the weight of my book bag. God, I remember so much. I wonder if everyone has memories like mine. I wonder how many other little girls have been so wounded by family.

"The road to grandma's house is never long." That is what the plaque on the wall says. I'd prefer that it said, "Escape is futile; abandon all hope ye who enter here."

I swallow the lump in my throat and move into the dark living room. It is just as I left it. The same couch with the same handmade throw sits in front of the same coffee table, holding her almost finished crossword puzzle. It never occurs to me that I'm breaking and entering. This is my grandmother's house! There are photographs of me as a child all over this place. They were taken when I was cute. When it was all right for me to be chubby and shy. Before I needed things like money, and praise, and support, and a place to live. Finally, the object of my desire is within view. The huge wall piano doesn't seem as big as it did when I was small and it was my favorite toy. It has never been tuned and is rarely dusted. I move to it and remove all of my grandmother's picture frames and candle sticks from it.

I pause. I might as well listen to it one last time before forever silencing the old girl. I raise the cover. I remember how difficult it used to be for me to lift the heavy wooden cover and how afraid I was of catching my tiny fingers in it like the mouse traps my grandmother keeps in the basement.

I press a key. It's so loud. It startles me. I remember I could never play softly, no matter how hard I tried. I play. First I play Fur Elise. It's my favorite song for the piano. Then, I play El Shadai, a gospel song I taught myself. Finally, after a short pause, I play Heart and Soul. It is only fitting. This is where I learned it.

Despite the piano being out of tune, I'm pleased and I know it's time to go on with my mission. I pull the piano from where it has been for more years than I've been alive and I struggle to push it across the living room floor. I don't stop there. I turn the corner and push it right out the door and onto the porch. I stop only to lock the door and replace the key to its hiding place. Then I get to pushing again. I push it into the field where I used to catch lightning bugs. I push it into what used to be my uncle's yard and where he used to keep his killer dog, Stetson, who liked only me and used to eat the eggs I couldn't clean off my plate in the morning. Stetson was destructive and dangerous. He broke every chain they put around him and had the strength to push several pounds of bricks from his way. I loved Stetson and quickly became unafraid of him. I wish he could see me now. I push the old antique wall piano past where I used to catch the school bus and on down the downward sloping road.

By now it has momentum. I'm not doing much work at all. I point the thing into the path of the creek where my dad used to catch crayfish as a boy and I let it go. It felt so good. It felt so good

seeing that piano that was never mine fly into the rushing water and break. It made a loud sound but not at all like one in the cartoons.

My mission was over. They'd never know it had been me. I loved the piano best; save perhaps for my younger cousin Lauren who used to play when I was no longer the new, adorable, fascinating grandchild. But she had her own piano now. This would be the biggest scandal Raceland, Kentucky had ever seen, with its two stoplights and high school comprised of only three hallways and a cafeteria. Is that enough, though? Will my anger fade?

The Wisherman

Stephen Mosca

One bright morning, a young man was walking down the beach and wishing that he had a mate to share his day with. The waves broke to his side producing their perpetual rhythmic white noise, and the sunlight would occasionally catch drops of flying spray which would sparkle like shards of the purest leaded crystal, ablaze from within. As he strolled along he wandered rather close to the incoming surf such that, at its zenith, the thinning water would reach to the very edges of his bare feet before retreating to their own element, the great Mother Sea. While he was thinking about his loneliness and walking close to the cool surf, a fish suddenly leapt out of an incoming wave and onto the sand before his very path. Had he not noticed the beached creature by the thrashing motions it made he might have easily stepped over it and walked on, none the wiser. But he did see the fish, and he stopped dead in his tracks to gaze down upon it.

"Please, throw me back into the sea," the fish implored, twisting itself to look up at the man. The young man, almost struck

dumb by this apparition, slowly stooped to pick up the fish in his hand and, straightening, examined it closely. He had never heard of a talking fish before, and this one looked no different from the countless others like it he had seen in the baskets of the village fishermen after a fruitful day with their nets.

"Please, throw me back into the sea," the fish repeated, pleadingly.

"I would throw you back into the sea, but I have no one else for company and would like to have a companion with whom to pass the time. As you can speak, won't you consider staying with me a while?" asked the young man as he regained his wits as well as his former pace.

"Oh, I could not do such a thing and keep my life," replied the fish. "But I will offer you something in return for my release."

"What can you offer?" asked the man, with a look of skepticism painted across his broad, tanned face.

"If you throw me back into the water right now, I will grant you three wishes," claimed the fish, who was by now looking back and forth from the man's face to the sea with a very thirsty and desperate expression on its scaly face. Seeing that the fish was in dire straights from being out of its element, the man figured he had little to lose and agreed, throwing the fish into the water with a careless toss, never breaking his slow but steady stride down the sun-drenched beach.

"Three wishes indeed!" the man said aloud to himself. "I wish

I would meet a woman instead of a talking fish."

No sooner had he uttered this remark than an attractive woman came into his view, walking towards him over the sand in a direction that would carry her path over his at somewhat the same moment in time. The man blinked a few times, thinking he may have been imagining this sudden vision, but the woman kept approaching, becoming more real, and more beautiful, as they closed on each other with each successive step. She wore a light colored, sleeveless summer dress which, when blown back by the incoming sea breeze, pressed tightly against her body, revealing a shapely and athletic form. Her hair was long and black and was also blown carelessly by the wind, though, he thought, in a most fetching manner. Her face was beautiful to behold, her eyes large, green and sparkling, her skin supple and pure, her lips like ripe red fruit. She was bare footed and her legs were beautifully tapered and tan. Her gaze met his as they approached each other. The man was riveted as much by her beauty as by her sudden appearance before him. As he was stunned into silence, it seemed quite fortunate that it was she who spoke first.

"Hello." Her voice was penetratingly clear and gentle at once. "Do you mind if I walk with you awhile? It's a beautiful day and I would very much enjoy the company of someone to share it with."

"Well, no, not at all. It would be my pleasure to have you join

me. I was just wishing for someone to enjoy the day with, myself."

And so they walked and talked down the glittering sand until the sun set low and burnished the sky with ever deepening violet hues. In that time, it became abundantly clear that each so enjoyed the company of the other that, from that afternoon on, they spent all their future days together.

After a while, a certain routine developed in their lives. The man noticed that the woman had some very definite ideas about what the man should and should not be doing and had no trouble telling him so. It got so that, at one point, the man remembered how he had met this women and secretly cursed that awful fish. Ah, the fish! He had forgotten all about it up till now but when he did remember it, he also remembered that he had wished to meet this woman, and just as the fish had promised, he had. So, again, figuring that he had nothing to lose, he turned towards the sea and said aloud: "Fish, if you're able to hear me, I ask you for a second wish. I wish that my woman would not have her own opinions, but that she always accept mine as her own."

He stood there for a long moment, feeling somewhat foolish. Then, with a shrug of resignation, he returned to the home they had made together. When he arrived, he did not find there what he had expected. Instead of his things placed neatly where the woman usually preferred them, they were scattered about haphazardly. When he searched for her near her sewing basket or out in the garden, she was not to be found. He looked all about and finally,

after wandering down to the old pier, found her drinking rum and telling bawdy tales at the old sailor's pub.

"What are you doing here?" he inquired of her with a tone of some surprise.

"I felt like having a drink or three and breathing the ocean breeze," she replied as naturally as if that is what she had always done. Thinking this not to be an entirely bad thing, the young man joined her and they drank and told stories with their new friends well into the next morning. From the fine stupor they had acquired, they proceeded to sleep in the warm, snug sand until the sun's morning rays met their closed eyelids. They awoke slowly, stretching out the kinks in their bones.

"What shall we eat for breakfast, my love?" the young man asked his mate.

"Oh, I don't care. Whatever you feel like having is fine with me."

So, the young man went about conjuring up an idea and then a plan and then had only to execute it, which he did, and soon they were eating a morning meal of crab meat and bread. The woman seemed happy enough just to be with him so that nothing else mattered to her and not a single complaint was heard, though he found the crab difficult to eat and the bread quite stale.

Well, it went on like this for some time. Every decision that had to be made, and there were many of them, was of no matter to the woman. Each and every decision, major and minor alike, was

deferred to what the man said he wanted. There came times when the man, for reasons of fatigue or disinterest or lack of preference, would find it quite bothersome to have to make each and every decision, but he knew that if he did not make one, one would simply not be made. So, as it happened, he found himself almost in the same condition as before, where he felt very much alone in the world, responsible for all that he did, plus all that his companion did as well. Eventually, this task became a burden upon him which seemed to grow in weight and dragged more heavily upon him with each passing day. It got so he no longer enjoyed the companionship of the woman, as there was nothing to her that he could contest. And because of the lack of mental discourse, there soon developed a lack of physical intercourse as well until any pleasure he once had from her was now only a distant and fading memory. His morose state caused him to lose interest in everything, even food, and so he seldom ate anymore and began to feel ill and began to look thin and pale.

One day, after having made all decisions big and small, and feeling like this difficult state of affairs would never cease to be, he remembered he had but one wish left from the fish. He considered his circumstances and gazed idly at his mate in a calculating manner. He construed there a being with no mind of her own and thus, to him, little value. That's it, then, one last decision; he would wish her gone, he thought. But before he did, he turned to his mate and asked her point blank:

"Do you think I should wish you away, and return to what I was before we came together?"

"I think you should do what you desire to do. If you care for me, do not wish it so, and if you no longer want me, then follow your own wish."

Befuddled by this conundrum, the man sat and sulked and pondered.

"I wish I never saw that damn fish!" he thought to himself and then, in that very instant, he found himself walking along the beach on a beautiful sunny day, all alone, watching the sun catch the bursting sea spray and turning it into prisms of colorful light that would rain down around him in a most delightful way. He strayed closer to the edges of the foamy surf, and as he did a fish leapt out of the roiling waters and landed before his naked feet. So absorbed was he in watching the beautiful display of nature that he never noticed the frantic motions of the beached creature and didn't realize that it had landed right beneath his very next footfall. As he pressed the fish into the sand with the entire weight of his body concentrated into that single stride, he was thinking only of how much he wished he had a companion with which to share such a glorious day.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

Karen Harrell

I'm so tired and I hate riding the bus. I have gotten to the point that I don't look at anyone anymore; people's faces are melding together like melted taffy. Besides, there is no point to discerning friend or foe in a crowd of tired, hot, frustrated people.

The bus is late, as usual. I try to get a seat on the left side of the bus, towards the front. It's easier for me to see my stop coming up, especially when I forget my glasses. And, of course, I've forgotten them again. My trip is usually 45 minutes in normal traffic, but today the bus seems to stop like an elevator carrying a sadistic, button-mashing child. Hopefully no one will sit next to me, but I don't have that kind of luck.

The man who sits next to me looks familiar in the small glance I give him before turning back to count stops. I can feel him staring at me and my neck is crawling. I look over at him and smile my "I should know you but I don't" smile, in case he is someone from long ago. His face is still recognizable, almost

like someone I worked with or knew from long ago. I can smell his sweat, but it is clean and has an underlying scent I know from somewhere.

He is smiling back at me and he asks me about my day. I tell him it was fine and leave it at that. I find that I have a face that invites crazy strangers to talk to me, whether I want them to or not. I hate talking to people on the bus; the bus should be as silent as a library. I turn back to the window, so he gives up.

Finally my stop is here and I have to go through the excuse me dance that is inevitable when getting out of an inside seat. But, to my surprise, the man is also getting off at this stop. As I step down from the bus I notice that he is standing at the corner, almost like he is waiting for me. I ignore him and start my short walk home. I can't wait to sit down, crack open a beer, maybe read the paper. In the back of my mind I can hear his footsteps with me but not beside me. This feels like a trip I've been on before and for some reason I feel the need to look back at him. I still can't place his face, but his clothes are familiar. Maybe he's a regular customer from work; I may have sold him his shirt. Or maybe he's a new neighbor; I've been too preoccupied to notice anyone moving in on my street.

We reach a street that is hard to cross during traffic, so we stand next to each other waiting for a break in the parade of cars. His scent smells even more familiar, that mixture of fresh sweat and shaving cream. I finally figure out that familiar scent

from the bus, he uses the same laundry detergent I use. For some reason this makes me want to kiss him, hold him, feed him, anything to keep him near me.

We cross the street and he is walking beside me. He holds open the gate for me as I dig through my purse for the house keys. I need to tell him to leave, but something stops me. I turn to look at his face and that urge to kiss him comes over me again. He looks like he belongs here, like he has always been here. I start to cry when it hits me; he's my husband and I love him. He takes my hand and walks me to the door.

that's just chaos

Vicky Smith

The rain slapped like the wet rag of a bitter maid against the dirty window. He slouched in the dilapidated armchair, and behind him the dingy curtains slouched from a crooked metal bar. A cracked mug of something gelatinized on the coffee table nursing a broken leg. A cigarette burned its filter in a choked green ashtray. The smoke limped upwards to join the cloud writhing with dust mites just below the sagging tiled ceiling. It was mid afternoon, but who cares about such things as that?

The room was tiny and the hues of emesis and urine -- the walls and the furniture and the yellowing ceiling- cast a sickly air to the place. Everything was fading and he could only see black and white, by this point, after the years had staggered by with no hello or goodbye.

The same songs played over and over on his tiny alarm clock radio; the time was wrong by seasons but he didn't notice, or if he did sometimes by random acknowledgement he didn't give a damn anyway.

She'd left him years ago, taken the kid too, and he called this peace, because nothing moved but specks in the cigarette smoke. Even the mangy dog he named "dog" didn't limp around anymore; it'd died three days ago and he knew it wasn't just sleeping over there curled up and emaciated in the shadows of the corner, but he couldn't smell it yet and he was grateful it no longer stood by the door for hours, waiting for him to by chance let it outside.

He lived efficiently, except for his smoking habit; he had to make effort to keep up his supply but he sent for them over the mail, boxes at a time, and paid with moldy cash he kept stuffed in the seat of the armchair. He didn't bathe, he rarely ate, and he never moved unless he had to. He slept in his tired old armchair and only woke up by accident, when closing his eyes didn't make him go to sleep again after a while. Then he stared woodenly straight ahead and made a point not to see or think about anything until sleep took him again. He chewed on his fingernails until he had to eat or the discomfort of hunger would be more bothersome than walking to the stained and festering kitchen. He pissed in an old mason jar on the grimy tiled floor beside the armchair; he aimed from where he was and sometimes he missed and sometimes he didn't and he never cared much. He was old so he didn't shit too often; when he did he did it in the scratched metal dog bowl so he wouldn't have to feed it. Old age had taken his senses years ago so his only

discomforts were the occasional need to eat and those horrible moments when he started thinking again.

He used to be a poet; he used to be an artist; he used to be a father; he used to be a husband. He used to be many things but now he was just used up as he sat there passively and waited for time to come get him. It was only the rain that tried to get in.

He lived out there on Tick road, an old dirt road out in the woods of some forlorn county lapping up against civilization. He was forgotten except by his wife, who hated him— he'd beat her and then his son until they both curled up and lost consciousness in the corner. She tried to forget him but the belt he beat her across the face with left scars, and she'd broken many mirrors in her day but the image wouldn't break; it just fractured and threw up a distorted reflection in puddles and side mirrors when she forgot to not look. The son killed himself, hanged himself with his daddy's special belt he found by accident in his mama's old trunk when he was 23, and that was ten years ago. The son was a poet too; he had a red headed girl he knocked up when they were both too young and a green eyed daughter named Thyme. Neither had met the old man; the son had run away when he was 13, stole his daddy's pea green Chevy, knocked his mama unconscious while he cried and took her with him because by then she was too weak and beat to leave the old man— he'd saved her from being a prostitute all

her life and if he told her once, he'd told her a thousand times- she wasn't worth shit, a cheap whore like her deserved it, he'd paid 35 bucks to fuck her because she had such a pretty face beneath the cake makeup.

And so the son hit her with a pan wrapped in towels and took her with him— strapped a belt around her legs so she couldn't run back when she came to and wrapped her up warm and tight in a quilt, tucked her in the passenger seat and put the seat belt around her. He didn't know how to drive back then but desperation teaches many things on the fly -- he drove well and far and together they forgot everything but time and its mercy. That corner in his daddy's house had seemed like a grave and everyone knows graves are forever. But it wasn't, they never got over that, they spent every New Year's Eve together and cried with a joy that hurt when the ball fell on the black and white TV in her aluminum trailer. He was a good kid, he only drank on the weekends when he didn't have to work and loved his girl and his daughter. He never wore a belt; for ten years he never wore a belt and maybe the shock of seeing one in his hand again was what got him, reminded him who his daddy was and scared him so much he got hung up on it.

His girl cried every day for a few years and neglected Thyme, but she got over it and married some guy named Braun; they had a kid together, a boy, and the boy and Thyme never got along but that's just how kids are -- the boy didn't under-

stand where Thyme was coming from; she'd been the one to find her daddy swinging from leather and she had nightmares and woke up screaming, but her mama never came to soothe her. Braun wore a belt and he hit her with it when the boy pushed her and she feared him, and when it really hurt she wished she'd find Braun swinging from his belt and told her mama so. Her mama slapped her and cried all night.

Thyme got older and ran away when she was 13, like her dead daddy. She had tits and hips by then and she used them to get around and get what she needed -- she never sold her cunt but she always promised to, and that little lie got her where she wanted to go.

She wandered and was wild, got into writing poetry and drawing some on a pad she carried all the time with the nub of a pencil she took from a cheap motel. She worked her way into more obscure and forgotten places, and wandered into the woods one day to be alone and think about her daddy. The woods reminded her of him. As she walked a foul smell knocked her gagging to her knees.

Thyme was the one who found the old man, sitting and staring in his house of shit and decay. He saw her walk in, the old whore that had left him so many jaded years ago, and it got his mind going. He lunged for her, calling her an ungrateful whore in his dry cracked voice he hadn't used in years and trying to take off his belt with his weak old hands.

Thyme was a street girl and a little sensitive to being called a whore, because she never sold her cunt, only promised to. She carried a knife with her tucked up under her bra strap between her tits and as she gagged at his stench she stabbed him with it, right in his frail old chest.

Thyme got him all right, and she took his moldy cash too; a few years later she went to visit her grandma and told her about the pissy old man and her grandma called it chaos, that's just chaos -- they smoked cigarettes together and sat at her grandma's old red card table watching the black and white TV on the kitchen counter. It was New Year's Eve and they watched the ball drop and Thyme's grandma cried and said it was because she was so beautiful, Thyme was so beautiful.

Five Minutes

Bianca Bury-Rodriguez

Once upon a time, my parents thought that they were gonna die. When the Berlin Wall came down, they took their first sigh of relief. The Russkies had been defeated; we were no longer at war.

When September 11th happened, that opened up a new can of worms. I hadn't realized how big it was until my parents sat me down and told me all kinds of emergency plans. "Heather, when you hear the explosion, you have five minutes."

Five minutes.

I was walking home from school, which is a good half-hour away, when I heard it. I had just crossed the point of no return. I had five minutes.

One-one-thousand-one, One-one-thousand-two, One-one-thousand-three.

I was running like a sonnuva bitch. My English book weighed me down, all of the authors in it (most of them dead) not giving a damn if I had to survive. Their words were already written down, they'd already survived.

One-one-thousand-ten, One-one-thousand-eleven.

I want to be a writer. I've been writing for at least five years now. My friends online think my stuff is really good. Some of them even know what I look like. As cheesy as it may sound, maybe I "will" survive.

One-one-thousand-thirty, One-one-thousand-thirty-one.

Nobody was coming outside. That was good and bad. Good because no one's enough of an idiot to make the mistake of coming outside and saying something incredibly stupid, like, "What's going on?" Bad because I couldn't run to the nearest house and get inside.

One-one-thousand-fifty, One-one-thousand-fifty-one, Those al-Qaeda sons of bitches.

One-one-thousand-seventy, One-one-thousand-seventy-one, One-one-thousand-seventy-two, One-one-thousand-seventy-three.

They aren't Muslims. Hell, they aren't even human

One-one-thousand-ninety-five, One-one-thousand-ninety-six, One-one-thousand-ninety-seven.

Did you see the carnage on TV when the WTC fell?

One-one-thousand-one-twelve, the news footage showed people jumping from the 89th floor. Those sick sons of bitches.

One-one-thousand-one-three-one, One-one-thousand-one-three-two, One-one-thousand-one-three-three.

What's today? Is that gonna be another national holiday? 9/11 was bad. The news footage for the next week and then in 2003, was just bad taste.

One-one-thousand-one-five-nine, One-one-thousand-one-sixty.

The Reporters love the scent of dead bodies, don't they? They're all over homicides and tragedies like flies. Makes you wonder who is worse Al-Queda for thinking up this shit, or for the media to enjoy the ratings.

One-one-thousand-one-eight-nine, One-one-thousand-one-nine-oh.

Damn them, damn them, damn them. Why the hell are they doing this to me? I'm American, does that give them the fucking right to kill me? Just because I'm not all about Allah? I believe in God; they THINK they're following Allah. We should be on the same side, right?

One-one-thousand-two-oh-six.

God wouldn't want this, I sure as fuck don't.

One-one-thousand-two-three-one. One-one-thousand-two-three-two.

My legs hurt, my lungs hurt, my head hurts, and if I stop running, I'm sure my heart'll hurt. Stupid fuckers.

One-one-thousand-two-six-one.

I can see my house from here, but my legs want to give out. I slip in a pothole, and DAMN, it hurts, but I have to keep

going, because if I don't, I'm gonna die, and God, I don't wanna die, I hate al-Qaeda, I hate running, I hate dirty bombs...

One-one-thousand-two-seven-one.

All I really, really hate is DYING!

One-one-thousand-two-eight-nine.

My house! I can make it, I can make it! My legs seem to have gotten a second wind from somewhere, desperation, most likely.

One-one-thousand-two-nine-one.

What's sixty times five? Three hundred? I can do it, I can do it. Mom's car isn't there.

One-one-thousand-two-nine-two.

What The fuck? There's a cloud . . . a big, green one,

one-one-thousand-two-nine-seven.

NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! It's not nerve gas! I don't care what color Dad said nerve gas was, that sure as Fuck isn't it!

One-one-thousand-two-nine-eight.

My limbs are seizing up. My hand's on the doorknob. DAMN.

One-one-thousand-three-hundred.

I love you Mom.

Don't Tell Mommy

Amy Limpert

Nicole was supposed to be in her room getting dressed. She really did not want to give her mother anything else to worry about, but she had to scratch. Her entire body was itching. No matter how much or how hard she scratched, it still yearned for just a little more. Nicole tilted her head listening to her mother's shoes as they came clicking down the hallway.

"Pumpkin, are you dressed?" Jean shouted, as she approached her daughter's room. "I need to fix your hair and we have to leave shortly!"

"Why aren't you dressed?" Jean franticly said. "It's ten after nine and we have to leave the house in fifteen minutes. We cannot be late! I told you over and over how important this day is to me." As Jean was hollering, she noticed Nicole clawing her nails up and down her arms.

"Nicole, come over here," Jean said as she began to examine the red bumps that had mysteriously appeared on her daughter overnight.

"I put my dress on, and then I had to take it off because I felt itchy everywhere. I have been scratching and scratching, but they just won't stop." Nicole moaned. "Did those bed bugs bite me? Why are there red spots? Am I sick? How come they won't stop itching? What do...?"

" Nicole! It's all right. It's not from the bed bugs, and you're not sick. It looks to me like you have hives."

"Hives? Like Grandpa's bee' hives? How did…"

"No sweetheart, not bee' hives," Jean chuckled. "Hives are the name of the bumps that you have. You must have had an allergic reaction to something. The bumps will go away in a couple of days. I have some cream in my medicine cabinet. We can put some ointment on them, and then they won't itch as much. I'll be right back."

Nicole sat on her bed, and looked up toward the ceiling where her white four- poster bed used to connect to a canopy. She had really liked having a canopy bed. When her mom brought home the new bed, she told Nicole that the man from the store said that it was a genuine princess bed. Right now, however, it didn't seem like a princess bed.

A few weeks ago, Nicole had been standing on her bed and thought that she could swing from bar to bar the way she did on the monkey bars on the playground at school. Her mom was pretty mad especially because she had ripped the towel bar out of the bathroom wall only days before, while trying to swing from the bathtub to the toilet.

"When are you going to stop swinging on everything?" Jean yelled. "This house is not a jungle gym!"

Nicole was not able to give her mother an answer. Since discovering that she could swing out into the bathroom by throwing a towel up over the shower rod, Nicole had dedicated a lot of time in finding other things she could swing on. Sadly, her pretty white eyelet canopy came crashing down when the first plastic support rod burst from her weight.

After a few moments of reminiscing over how her now destroyed princess bed came to its present state, Nicole heard the clacking of her mother's shoes getting louder as the sound approached her bedroom.

"Are you nervous about the wedding?" Jean said softly, as she sat down next to Nicole on the bed.

"No, I just want to make sure that I do a good job." Nicole smiled as she looked up at her mother. "Mom, you look really, really pretty."

"Thank-you, Pumpkin. "If you are nervous, it's O.K. You can tell me and we can talk about it. I know that it is a big step for both of us, but we'll help each other through it, right?"

She smiled, nodded her head in agreement, and reached her arms up to give her mom a hug.

Jean was driving her 82' black Capri faster than usual, trying to get to her wedding on time. The radio played softly in the background. Nicole sat buckled up in the back seat looking out the window. Jean was always just a few minutes behind schedule, so naturally that meant Nicole was late for most everything. Nicole often ate her breakfast in the car as Jean raced to get her to school on time. She didn't mind being late that much, because going fast meant she would be able to feel the road bumps really good.

Jean reached for the dial on the radio and a man's voice roared out.

"Trapper Jack is back. It's 9:35 am, and you guys better get off your seat and move your feet. This gorgeous sunny morning won't be here for long. There's a eighty percent chance of heavy rain and thunderstorms. A ten set music sweep after the break."

"Oh no, I hope the rain holds off until after the wedding," Jean wailed.

"Why? I love the rain. It's so much fun. When it rains at Grandma's house, I put on my bathing suit, go outside, and dance on the driveway."

"Well, that does sound like fun, but it is supposed to be really bad luck if it rains on your wedding day," Jean wailed, her howl in unison with that of the tire screech as she made a sharp turn into the parking lot.

Grabbing Nicole's hand, Jean quickly walked toward the center of a little park where a white wood Victorian gazebo held her family, a pastor, and Tony.

"Mom, I'm starting to itch again," she said, bending down to run her chewed fingernails forcefully up and down her legs.

"Today is very important to mommy. Please do everything just like we practiced. We will not be here long. Afterwards, you can take off your dress and we can add more cream. You'll be fine, O.K." Jean again took hold of her daughter's hand and led her towards the ceremony.

Standing in the gazebo, Tony and Jean exchanged their wedding vows. To Jean's right side stood her daughter. As the flower girl, she was the only member of the wedding party. It was a very small wedding. Nicole held herself still, closed her eyes and tried everything she could think of not to scratch. The

long sheer sleeve dress with it's ruffled neck and matching tights that she had been forced to wear made her itch even more. Hoping the dress would help out and do a little of the work, she began to move from side to side, arching her shoulders back and forth. No luck! She lifted her tiny patent leather shoe and ran it down the shin of her other leg. Oh, that felt so good! As she quickly switched her flower basket from one hand to the other in an effort to itch, several of the flowers tumbled out onto the floor. Jean flashed her a warning glance. Nicole looked from her mother to Tony, who shook his head as if to say "No more!"

"It's almost over, honey," Grandma whispered in her ear. "You can be a big girl and wait just a few more minutes for mommy to finish."

Nicole stood still for mommy.

Trying hard to forget the perpetual itching, Nicole let her mind wander back to the first time she had met Tony. She had been in her room having a tea party with her two best friends Allie and Jack. The three friends had just invited Mr. Toad, the bee, and Big Bunny to join them, when Jean came in and asked if they could talk.

"Nicole, I have a very special friend of mine that I would like you to meet. His name is Tony. He is very nice, and

is excited to meet you! We are going to meet him tomorrow night at 7 o'clock for dinner. How does that sound?"

"O.K. Where are we going? Can we go to Chucky Cheese?"

"No, we are going to a nice restaurant. You and I can go to Chucky Cheese another time."

"Can Jack and Allie come too? Please! Can they? Pleeeeeeeease!"

"We'll see," said Jean letting a little laugh escape. "I'll ask Tony if he minds if we have another two join us."

As it turned out, Tony picked an especially nice restaurant for dinner. The Flight Deck, rated among the city's top five places to dine, was located directly across the street from an airport. Using the location to its advantage, the restaurant had incorporated several headsets that would allow the patrons to listen to the conversations in the control tower.

Jack spilled grape juice all over Allie's dress, so Jean and Nicole arrived a little later then expected. The hostess led them to a table near one of the stone fireplaces where Tony sat waiting for the remainder of his party. He immediately presented Jean with a bouquet of flowers and gave Nicole a music box. Tony reached across the table and cupped Nicole's little hand in his, as he introduced himself.

"It is so nice to finally meet you, Nicole. I have heard wonderful things about you, but you're even prettier than the picture your mom showed me."

Nicole smiled and thanked Tony for his present. She looked at the silver design that was engraved on the surface of the little piano. She loved music boxes. In fact, she already had a small collection started. After she had fully inspected her new treasure, Nicole politely introduced Tony to her two guests. Tony quickly shook both of their hands. Without speaking to either Jack or Allie, Tony picked up his menu.

After dinner, Nicole, Allie and Jack sat in Jean's car. They could see Jean standing outside talking to Tony.

"So what do you guys think of him?" Nicole said. "I think he's real nice. I like my music box. Do you want to guess what song it plays?" Nicole tipped the music box over so they could try to identify the tune.

"I don't know. I didn't like how he tried to order for everyone. He seems sort of bossy," Allie said as she looked out the window at Jean.

"I didn't want to eat my potato. I only like mashed potatoes, " Jack exclaimed as he shrugged his shoulders.

Nicole became quiet and stared at her mother. She then focused her eyes on the pleats of her royal blue velvet dress. Quickly shaking her head, she turned toward her friends.

"She liked those flowers!" Nicole said convincingly.

The memory of that first meeting faded as the wedding ceremony finally came to an end. Nicole rode with her grandparents back to their house. A reception had been planned to take place in their backyard. However, the celebration ended abruptly in the early afternoon when the predicted thunderstorms poured down on the outside festivities.

Against the wishes of his bride and family, Tony cursed the rain and remained outside cleaning up. Once inside the house, Nicole went to the window that overlooks the backyard and watched Tony as he slammed down one plate on top of another.

Nicole spent the next week with her grandparents, while her mother and Tony went to Hawaii for their honeymoon. Jean was right. Nicole's hives disappeared in days, so it made her visit much more pleasant. She loved spending time with her grandparents. They helped Jean raise her because Nicole's parents had divorced before she was a year old.

Nicole went to Apple Falls Elementary, which was right down the road from her grandparent's house. She walked to their house everyday after school, and stayed until Jean picked her up after work.

That week, Grandma made Nicole her favorite lunch, a grilled cheese sandwich, a pickle on the side, milk with straw-

berry Quick and iced animal crackers for dessert. Grandpa took her fishing that week as well. Grandma and Grandpa liked Allie and Jack, so Nicole was able to play with them often. They went on several bike rides, played on the swings, and had a tea party. Jack complained about having a tea party, but after Grandma gave him cookies with his tea he didn't mind so much.

After the honeymoon, Tony began moving his things into the apartment. He didn't have many boxes, so it did not take long. Grandpa offered to help Tony move the boxes with his truck, but Tony said he and Jean could move the boxes themselves.

The daily routine quickly resumed itself. Nicole was allowed to watch her shows before she went to sleep. Bedtime consisted of a tuck in, a story, a kiss, and on very special nights a song. There were times that even after Nicole was supposed to be asleep, she would creep into the living room and complain of insomnia, stomach pains, or hunger. Sometimes, she just wanted her mommy to come and lay down beside her for a little while. Tony always offered his advice during these events.

"When are you coming out? It is past her bedtime. If you let her be, she'll go to sleep on her own." Tony would stand in the doorway and watch until Jean got up. Sometimes, Jean would tell Tony to go and wait for her in the living room.

However, Tony refused to leave, so eventually Jean would give Nicole a kiss and a hug, then walk out of the room. Nicole did not understand this. Her mom had always stayed with her before.

"Why does Tony make mommy go away?" Nicole asked Jack and Allie. "She used to lay in bed with me all the time."

"Maybe Tony wants to steal your mommy!" Jack yelled at Nicole. His eyes got very big as he thought about what he had said. Jack sometimes jumped to conclusions.

"What do you think, Allie? Do you think that Tony is trying to steal my mom from me?"

Nicole let her head hang. She let out a long sigh, allowing her bottom lip to poke out just a bit. Her lips began to quiver. A burning sensation formed in her eyes as she fought the tears from coming. Allie, seeing how upset Nicole was, gently stroked her head.

"Nicole, I don't think that Tony is trying to steal your mom. Your mommy loves you. She would never leave you. Not for anything!" Allie said very slowly and calmly. Allie and Jack looked at each other, then back at Nicole.

After living in the apartment for several weeks, Tony attempted to dictate all of the household activities. Tony complained if his wife went out without him. Jean's family and

friends did not call or visit as much anymore. She did not seem to do anything unless it included Tony. Nicole avoided Tony. She tried to spend as much time as she could with Jack and Allie. Nicole was afraid to play with Jack and Allie near Tony because there had been a few occasions when Tony had been mean to them. One day, while the three of them were sitting on the floor playing, Tony walked by and stepped on Jack's foot. Jean saw him do it.

"Sorry, " he said. "It was an accident."

One evening, Nicole was lying on the couch watching the television and waiting for her dinner, when Tony walked in through the front door and spoke to her.

"Children should speak to an adult when they see them!" Nicole did not know what to say, so she nodded her head and pulled the blanket up almost to her eyes.

The next evening, Nicole was again in the living room when Tony arrived at home.

"Hi Tony!" she stammered, giving a little smile and a wave.

"Nicole, children should say more then "hi" to an adult. A child should be polite, look at the adult, say hello, and ask them how they are doing."

"O.K. I'll do it right next time."

Nicole was nervous, so she practiced the whole next day what she would say to Tony when he came home. Tony walked through the door. She knew he was coming. She had been listening and waiting.

"Hello Tony! How are you doing?"

Tony stared down at Nicole. Then he slowly smiled.

She nervously smiled back at him. "Nicole, children should be seen and not heard."

Nicole sat looking at Tony. She didn't know what to say. Her eyes started to well up with tears. She pulled the blanket over her head and softly cried. She pretended that she was watching the television, but she knew that he could hear her crying. That night when she was in bed she could hear Tony and her mom arguing. Even though she had crept off her bed and over to the bedroom door, she could not understand what they were saying.

Nicole told Jack and Allie about what had happened. They both gave her a big hug and told her that everything would be all right.

"Did you tell your mom what Tony said?" Allie asked.

"She was in the kitchen making dinner. I think she

heard him," Nicole answered, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. Her nightmares woke her up several times throughout the night.

"Nicole, maybe Tony is trying to be a good daddy." Jack said, lifting his eyebrows and his hands in agreement.

Nicole really did not know what a good daddy was supposed to be like. The only father she had ever known was her grandfather and Tony was nothing like him. She listened to Jack's advice and tried very hard to be good, but it seemed that Tony disliked the way she did most anything.

Soon, the Thanksgiving holiday came around. Dinner was always at Grandma and Grandpa's house, as was every other holiday meal. Being the only child at these family functions, Nicole received most of the attention. She liked that part. Her family seemed to really like Tony. He complimented the fabulous smells from Grandma's cooking. He talked with grandpa about politics. He joined the pre-toast in which he sipped on grandpa's favorite drink, Crown and ginger. However, every time Nicole looked at Tony, he seemed to be inspecting her and scrutinizing all of her actions.

Thanksgiving dinner was wonderful, as always. Everyone had eaten so much food that it was hard to move. By the smiles, the compliments, and the continuing sighs that were

It was fairly late in the evening by the time the pumpkin pie was finished. Nicole needed to be in bed at a reasonable hour so Jean asked Tony if he could take her home. Jean wanted to stay and help clean up the remanents of their feast. Tony glanced over at Nicole, and glared his eyes at her. Then he turned back to Jean and smiled..
searching for some relief, it appeared that everyone was happy.

"It would be my pleasure. Nicole, are you ready to go home?"

"No! I don't want to go. I want to stay. Please! I'll help clean up. Please!"

"Jean, Nicole can spend the night here. That way she can go and get in bed right now," Grandma said.

"No. She does not always have to get her way," Jean snapped.

"Nicole, I want you to go home with Tony and get right into bed." Jean bent down and kissed her daughter on the head. "I will be home shortly and promise to check on you."

Tony thanked Jean's family for their hospitality. Nicole again announced to the room that she wanted to stay, but Jean refused to budge on this issue. It was late.

Nicole threw herself down on the floor and started yelling, "I don't want to go. I want to stay. Grandma, please

let me stay with you." Her face turned red, as she gasped for air in between her sobs. "Pleeeeeease, let me staaaaaaaay. Pleeeeeeeeease!" She continued to scream, "I…I…don't want to goooooooo. Pleeease, let me stay!"

However, in the end, she had no choice but to leave with Tony.

Tony and Nicole rode through the curves and turns in darkness and silence. She could see Tony watching her in the rear-view mirror.

"Nicole, you were a very bad girl today. Your mom and your grandparents were very disappointed in your behavior. What are we going to do about this?"

"No! That's not true. I was good."

Nicole began to pick and bite at her nails. She got very quiet, and looked out the window, studying every house on the road as they passed by.

Nicole followed behind Tony as they walked up to their apartment building. Tony used his key to unlock the front security door. They walked down the hall. The heavy metal door collided with its frame and closed. The sound echoed through the hallway. Tony opened the door to their apartment and let Nicole walk in front of him into the dark apartment. She hesitated in the light of the hallway, but he told her to go inside.

Tony made her stand alone in the total blackness before he stepped inside and turned on a light.

"Nicole, go and get ready for bed. I will come in a few minutes."

"You don't need to tuck me in," Nicole said quickly. "Mom said that she'll do it when she comes home."

"Nicole, I am not coming to tuck you in. Your earlier behavior needs to be dealt with. I will be in once I decide in what manner that will be done."

Nicole went into her bedroom and changed into her pajamas. As she was about to get into bed Tony came into her bedroom.

"Nicole, you acted terrible at your grandparent's house. You were very bad. Everyone, your aunt and uncles, your grandparents, your mother and I, talked about how awful you were. You have to be taught a lesson so that you will learn how to behave. Your family does not want to be around you when you misbehave."

Nicole straightened her body, crossed her arms defiantly over her chest, and scrunched up her face.

"I was not bad. My family does want me to be with them. If I wasn't a good girl, mom would have told me."

"Nicole, you were bad, very bad, and you will be punished. I want you to lie on your stomach and pull down your pajama bottoms."

Nicole felt her whole body begin to tremble. Her mouth became very dry. Her stomach became queasy. Her heart felt like it was going to beat out of her chest. She wished her mother would come home. She sat frozen, unable to move.

"Nicole! Are you being bad right now?" Tony shouted. "I think I told you to do something. Now be good, and do what I told you to do!"

Nicole crouched her head. She focused her eyes on her little stuffed bee that was lying on her pillows. Slowly she crawled off her bed.

Tony took off his leather belt and folded it in the palm of his hand. He raised it up in the air. CRACK! Tony lashed the belt hard across Nicole's backside. Nicole screamed out in pain.

"Nicole, I am going to hit you seven times for each person that you misbehaved in front of today. Maybe this will help you remember to act like a good little girl."

His voice sounded very strange to her. It was louder and more rushed than usual. Tears streamed down her face. She screamed out for her mother when words escaped through the sobs.

Tony did not apply the promised amount of punishment. He told Nicole that he was going to stop because her mother had asked him to have the punishment over with by the time she got home. However, Nicole did not know the difference. In her mind, she would remember the number seven.

Tony slowly wound his belt back through his belt loops. He checked his watch and glanced over at Nicole. She was humped over in a swell of pain and confusion. Her pajamas were soaking wet from her tears.

"Nicole!…Nicole!" Tony yelled. "I want you to end this crying right now and get into bed."

Choking on her tears, Nicole allowed her body to unfold from its crumpled position. She slowly pulled back the covers and crawled in. Tony turned off the light and sat at the edge of her bed.

"Nicole, you made me do what I did tonight," Tony said softly. "If you are a good girl from now on this will not happen again. If you tell anyone about this, you will not be able to live here anymore. Your mother will not want you, just like your father did not want you. She does not want a bad little girl. Your mother will be home soon, and I want you to be asleep before she gets home."

Nicole continued to cry, choking on her tears. She slid her whole body down the bed underneath the covers and cried softly for a long time. She could tell that Tony was still there. Finally, he got up and walked slowly out of her room.

Some time later, the front door opened and she heard her mother's voice.

"So how did everything go with Nicole? Is she in bed?"

"Everything went fine."

Nicole heard her mother coming towards her room. She was still curled up in a tight ball facing the wall, with the blankets pulled up over her head. Jean tiptoed beside the bed. Under the covers, Nicole's eyes were wide open.

"Nicole, what are you going to do? You have to tell your mom!" Allie screamed.

"If you don't tell her, then I'm going to!" Jack added rebelliously and started to march toward the door of Nicole's bedroom.

"No you can't tell. If you do, she will think I'm bad. I wasn't supposed to tell anyone. No one can tell." Nicole looked both of her friends in the eye. "You have to promise that you won't tell."

Jack and Allie promised, but they were afraid for Nicole. They wanted to help, but they didn't know what to do. They wanted to tell, but what if Tony was right. What if Nicole's mother really didn't want her? Jack and Allie always thought Nicole was a good girl, but what if she wasn't?

Over the next few weeks, Nicole's disposition began to decline. She was not her usual happy self. She did not have much to say over dinner. Tony, however, chattered away. Nicole did not watch any television. The only thing that made her happy was to play with Jack and Allie. She did not ask her mother to sing for her, or to lie in bed with her. Jean kept asking her if she felt all right and feeling her forehead for any signs of a temperature.

One night, after Nicole had gone to bed, Jean decided to wash some clothes. She sorted the dirty clothes, and quickly hurried to the building's community laundry room. Nicole was awake, lying in bed. She had heard the front door close.

A few moments later, Tony came into her room. He sat at the foot of her bed as he had been doing whenever such an opportunity arose.

"Nicole, you're not asleep are you?" Tony asked quietly. "Your mother and I were talking and she still thinks that you're

a bad little girl. Everyone can see what a rotten little brat you are." He hissed. "Nicole, your mommy doesn't love you anymore. She doesn't want you. Nobody wants you."

Nicole began to cry, as she always did when he said these things to her. She believed everything that Tony told her. He knew she told Jack and Allie all of her secrets. He told her that he hated them and, if she didn't stop telling them things he was going to hurt them. The front door opened, and Tony quietly slipped out of the room.

In the last few months, Nicole's teachers had phoned Jean several times concerned with Nicole's declining behavior. Her attention was not focused on class related materials. Nicole's teacher, Ms. Pearson, had phoned Jean again because Nicole had kicked a boy at recess when he refused to give her the ball. Then she had ripped a handful of hair out of a fellow classmate's head because he had used some of her art supplies.

That evening when they got home, Jean questioned Nicole about her behavior at school. Tony involved himself in the discussion by adding that Nicole should be punished. Jean became very angry with Nicole when she refused to look at her, let alone provide some reason for her unruly behavior. Nicole was spanked. That was one of very few times that Jean had ever hit her daughter.

A few weeks after the spanking, Jean picked Nicole up from school. Nicole was surprised to see her mom at the school because she should have been at work. They came home, and Nicole went straight into her room. After being home for some time, Jean peeked into Nicole's room. Nicole knew her mother was there, but she did not look up. Nicole was playing with Jack and Allie. Finally, Nicole looked up and locked eyes with her mother, then quickly looked away. Jean came into the room and sat down in front of Nicole.

"Nicole, Tony is not going to live with us anymore. He left and is never coming back." Nicole began fidgeting with her skirt and looked up at her mother. She looked deep into her mother's eyes, searching to find out if this was a trick. Unable to find an answer, she focused all her attention on the plaid pattern of her skirt.

"Nicole, was Tony ever mean to you?"

Nicole began folding her skirt into little triangle pieces.

"Did Tony ever touch you in the wrong way?" Jean's voice began to get shaky.

"Nicole! Answer me! Did Tony ever do anything to you?"

"I'm not supposed to tell," Nicole whispered, still folding and unfolding the corners of her skirt.

"Nicole…" Jean's voice quieted. She leaned over and held up Nicole's chin so she could see her eyes. "Whatever you tell me will be all right. I will not be angry with you." Jean ran her fingers gently through Nicole's hair, "I love you so much, sweetheart. You can tell me."

Nicole pulled away and sat motionless. Every muscle tensed up as she desperately tried not to blink her eyes. She tried to hold back the tears, but the emotion was uncontainable and she burst into tears. Jean reached over and began to stroke Nicole's hair again. Nicole threw herself onto her mother's lap and buried her head under her arm for a long time. Jean continued to run her fingers through Nicole's hair in a slow, calming motion.

As she lay on Jean's lap crying, she told her mother all the horrible things Tony said to her. She told her about the belt. Nicole told Jean that one day, she, Ali and Jack were playing in her room and were talking into a tape recorder. They were making up a story and they wanted to hear what their voices sounded like.

"You went somewhere and Tony came in to my room. He started telling me all those bad things. Later, we were listening to our story and the part came on when Tony came

into my room. I didn't mean to have him on there, but when he came I got scared and forgot that it was on."

"Nicole, do you still have that tape?"

"Uh-huh. Our story about Gus the mouse is on there, too."

Jean played her daughter's tape. She sat motionless, her mouth hanging open, her right hand placed on her forehead. Nicole could feel her mother's tears as they fell and rolled down onto her face.

They hugged for along time, neither one speaking a word.

"Pumpkin, I am so sorry. Don't believe that for a minute. I love you more than anything in this world," Jean sobbed as she wiped her eyes. "I will love you forever. Nothing will change that. I know how scared you must have been. I just wish you had told someone. If only I had known," Jean said as tears endlessly flowed down her cheeks.

"Mommy, I did tell."

"Who?" Jean jerked upright and searched Nicole's face for an answer.

"I told Jack and Allie. They told me to tell you, but I was too afraid."

Jean looked over at Jack and Allie. They sat side by side, their button eyes gazing straight ahead.

Faith Under Fire

Stephen Mosca

My father had a younger sister named Delores, but everyone called her Dee. When I was a kid, Aunt Dee was an incredibly important influence in my life. Although she was clearly an adult, she was also kind of like a kid. She was the one who bought the first Beatles records I ever heard and let my brother and sister and I listen to them in her apartment until we sang and danced ourselves ragged. She even went to go see the Beatles in person at Shea stadium in 1964, even though she was in her thirties at the time. I loved Aunt Dee. Dee knew how to have fun like few other adults I knew.

Dee was very involved in her church. My mom was basically a "verbal" Catholic; she talked a good game and sang in the choir at "Our Lady of Mt. Carmel" church where we would sporadically attend services, but other than that we didn't think about or discuss religion much. Dee was the only one I knew who was both seriously involved with the church and happy in the sense that she didn't automatically associate her

religion with guilt. In fact, she was always happy and seemed quite guiltless even while being devout. This was a rare and refreshing combination.

Aunt Dee never married and I faintly recall some talk that she had been so serious about the church at one time that she had considered joining the order and becoming a nun. But she never proselytized in the slightest degree, at least not to me. She was just a fun, happy person with a great sense of humor whom I could always count on to be fair and mature and playful and sometimes even a little bit mischievous, all at the same time.

The years went by and I became an adult myself. Due to the nature of my work I had to move away from my home town. Aunt Dee had since retired from her job working for a local attorney and had begun to travel around quite a bit with a girlfriend that she knew from church named Mary Massi. They had known each other for as long as I could remember. I recall seeing Mary Massi when my aunt would sometimes take us to church (and then to the diner afterwards for tea and english muffins with jelly and butter) and Mary would always fuss over how big and good looking we were becoming and pinch our cheeks, pulling the flesh of our faces as if to try to have a piece of us for her own.

Dee and Mary began traveling together and I at learned from my sister that what they were doing, that the motive behind the trips and the places that they chose to visit, was

religious in nature. They were visiting all the places in the world where it was claimed a miracle had either once occurred or was presently occurring. Apparently, there is no shortage of such claims and they were traveling the globe checking each one out personally in the order of how genuine they felt the claim to be. At one point they journeyed to a small town in Romania to see a statue of the virgin Mary in some women's basement that was claimed to be crying real tears. This particular statue had been pretty notorious among the faithful at the time and so Aunt Dee and Mary made the arduous trip immediately so that their chances of actually witnessing the miracle would be favorable.

I happened to be in New York for a weekend not long after Aunt Dee's return and had called my sister to see if she wanted to get together and have dinner while I was in town. She said that, coincidentally, she was supposed to have dinner with Aunt Dee that Saturday night and that I should come along as well. It would be the first time the three of us would be together in years, and who knew how long it would be until we all managed to get together again in the future and so I immediately agreed.

Saturday night came and at the appointed time we all met at a Red Lobster restaurant on Central Avenue in Yonkers. My sister and I, who saw each other and spoke fairly frequently by phone, had just gotten our greetings out of the way when Aunt

Dee came in. She was the same as ever. Short dark hair, big warm smile, her beaming personality exuding life and optimism. She was, as always, simply but fashionably attired, happy and energetic. She greeted us with warmth and affection as if we were still the small children who sheltered beneath her umbrella of unconditional love during our most trying of times. After we were seated and had ordered some appetizers, we began to discuss what each of us had been up to since we were all together last.

My sister graduated college and traveled to England for a while. She now worked for a large brokerage firm in Manhattan as a systems analyst and had become a Vice President of her department. I had taken a job as a consultant with a large defense contractor and was working in San Diego, living on the beach and driving a Corvette. Aunt Dee was typically expressive in her amazement at the paths of our lives and made us feel quite proud of ourselves in the telling of our own, perhaps otherwise taken for granted, accomplishments, which is just what Aunt Dee could always be counted on to do. We then asked her what she had been up to in the last several years and she began to tell us of the literally miraculous places she had been and the people she had met. Soon the story progressed to the weeping Madonna in Romania.

"Mary Massi and I went to Romania where there's a statue of the virgin Mary who cries real tears," she told us eagerly and in all sincerity.

"What do you mean?" I asked My sister looked on knowing that I, always the skeptic, could be relied upon to ask more than enough questions for the both of us and so she need only sit and listen for most of her own questions to eventually be asked and answered.

"Well," Dee went on, "there's this statue of the Madonna and the women who has it got it from a church that was destroyed during the war, a church where some saints are buried. She rescued this statue and put her in the basement of her house and built a small altar around it and one day she noticed what looked like tears running down from the eyes of the statue."

"Hmmm," my sister murmured.

"Maybe it's just condensation," I offered gently.

"A lot of people thought the same thing and they all have tried to figure out a reason why a statue would weep. They had it x-rayed and examined by scientists but no one can figure out a reason for this to happen. And it only happens sometimes. But they're real tears, they even taste salty."

Obviously, Dee was convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt and she marveled at the implications this held for her beliefs. How wonderful, I thought to myself, that it is true enough for Dee to get some real peace from believing it. But I was young, and a newly trained engineer who was becoming practiced at searching for rational explanations for unexplained events, and I couldn't resist trying to see if I could uncover any logic in this apparent apparition.

"Why would a statue in a basement in Romania be the one that the Madonna would choose to personify herself?" I asked. "Why not the one in St. Patrick's Cathedral downtown, or in the Vatican, or even all statues of the Madonna everywhere at once?"

"I don't know, Stevie, but this is real. Mary Massi and I saw it for ourselves." Aunt Dee's voice was full of enthusiasm and very sincere. She was getting excited in recalling the trip and her time with the statue, with the throngs of believers pressing together into a single, throbbing human mass, their combined energy directed towards this symbol of ultimate hope. This living statue was an acknowledgement of, and actual contact with, their difficult and often cruel earthbound lives.

"There are thousands of people who travel to see this virgin, to pray and to touch her tears. Both Mary and I have a piece of holy cloth that was used to dry the tears. Here, I have it right here."

As Dee began rummaging around in her pocketbook my sister and I exchanged a furtive glance. Not that we thought our dear Aunt was going off her nut or anything, but it was a little bizarre to be sitting in a Red Lobster in Yonkers while someone we knew and loved dearly was looking through her purse for piece of cloth she was certain had been blessed with the actual tears cried by the Virgin Mary for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ himself, as manifest in a stone figurine in some

obscure Romanian basement. All we could see of Dee for a while was the top of her head, her black hair hanging down obscuring her features, her arms working furiously, searching the contents of the bag on her lap when suddenly, with a triumphant flourish, she straightened up and held forth the object of her search: Among the rosaries and Mass cards there was a plastic packet with a small square of what looked to be a slightly smudged piece of white cotton cloth, about an inch square, its edges slightly frayed, which she extracted from its pouch and held gingerly by one corner in front of herself for us to behold. We gazed at the small artifact for several moments, cocking our heads this way and that, wondering exactly what we should be seeing or thinking or saying at being presented with something supposedly as holy and sacred as this miraculous shred of fabric but seeing only a small, rather unremarkable piece of what was perhaps only garden variety Romanian linen. Dee was fingering it lightly between her thumb and forefinger and gazing between it and us as if all doubts had now been laid to rest.

My sister sat there politely, peering at the item before her, and may have reached out and touched it herself, if only for a moment. Her expression was one of approval, encouraging Dee's already formulated opinion, offering no counterpoint. I, on the other hand, decided to pursue the subject just a tad further.

"So, you're telling me that this cloth has the tears of the virgin Mary on it?" I asked.

"Yup," Dee replied, rather blissfully. "It's blessed cloth, Stevie. Holy. Nothing can harm it and it brings me good fortune and protects as long as I carry it with me."

Rats! An absolute claim had been made. I should have disregarded it, but it just wasn't in me to do so. I was still very much a certain type of cynic; alert to my definition of words but ignorant of their value as used by others. Her metaphysical claim had engaged a side of my personality that perhaps would better have been left at home that particular evening. With as much zeal as insensitivity, I pressed the issue.

"What do you mean *nothing* can harm it?"

"It's indestructible. Once it has the holy tears on it there's nothing that can harm it. It's truly a miracle."

"But, how do you really know?" I asked sincerely. "Have you tried to do anything to harm it? Have you ever tried to, say…tear it, for instance?" I inquired.

"No. But there are stories of cloth just like this one stopping bullets and curing cancer and all kinds of otherwise unexplainable things," she told me. "Almost every villager there had a story to tell like that."

"Do you mean to tell me that if I were, say, to try to burn that cloth right now that it simply wouldn't burn?" I knew I

was getting into dangerous territory here, but being young, imprudent and thus engaged, I simply couldn't let such a claim pass. Besides, somewhere inside I really wanted it all to be true, for the cloth to be truly indestructible, for my Aunt Dee to really have a tangible basis for being as good as she had always proven herself to be. We all sat in quiet contemplation for a moment. Dee, who had been holding out the cloth all this time, now handed it over to me and I took it and felt it between my fingers. It was a act of trust on her part, I suppose. Of the cloth itself, I perceived nothing extraordinary. I then handed it to my sister who took it very gingerly, looked at it intently, first the one side, then the other, and then gently handed it back to Aunt Dee. I noted to myself that my sister and I handled Dee's cloth as if it were extremely fragile instead of the very essence of permanence it was purported to be.

"That's wonderful, Dee," my sister said with an over eager expression of approval, obviously humoring the old gal. I thought the controversy had safely passed, but Dee must have registered the tone of my sister's voice and a sudden gleam came into her eye. I thought I recognized it as that mischievous quality I suspected resided within her still. She fixed her gaze at me.

"Go ahead, Stevie, try to burn it," she blurted out. It was more a command than an offer.

"No! Dee, I couldn't." I noticed I was physically backing away from the table as I said this. "There is no way I'm going to burn up something you went all the way to Romania to get. Besides, you said it wouldn't burn and if you believe it won't, why shouldn't I?"

"No, really, go ahead, I want you to. It won't burn, you'll see. Once the Madonna's tears have touched it, it lost its worldly ability to be harmed. Don't be afraid. I'm not."

I looked at my sister. She gave me one of those "you're on your own" looks. I looked back at Dee who was sitting there radiating the faith she felt in her heart and proclaimed with her words, holding the little square of cloth in the middle distance between us, offering it up as proof of her sincerity. I looked into Dee's eyes, those trusting, loving eyes I would never intentionally hurt, and the cloth between us went slightly out of focus, becoming a visual blur against the reality of the clattering restaurant activity around us. My sense of what to do had also become a bit blurry.

"Dee, if I light this up and it burns, we'll both feel terrible, so let's just let it go, ok?" Now I was trying desperately to back out. Why must the rubber always meet the road, after all?

"It won't burn Stevie, believe me. Go ahead, try to light it on fire. I want you to try."

So, I took the cloth from my aunt with my left hand and held it out before me over the center of the table by one of its

corners so that it was suspended equidistantly between the three of us. The lighting in the room was rather dim and seemed to get even dimmer as I prepared to test my Aunt's faith as well as my judgement as a good nephew. I slowly reached into the breast pocket of my shirt with my right hand and took out my cigarette lighter. I held the lighter about a half an inch below the lowest corner of the sacred cloth and glanced once more at my aunt and then at my sister, who sat there kind of slack-jawed in disbelief that I was actually going to do such a thing. I was waiting to see if the bluff would be called. My sister's look became worried. My aunt looked supremely confident. No resistance was offered.

"You sure?" I asked one last time, raising my eyebrows to impart the significance of the question.

Aunt Dee nodded assuredly and said, "go ahead."

I flicked the striker on the lighter and the small bluish flame leapt from its maw. We all sat transfixed at the sight of the initial flame, all our attention focused as it was on the cloth, the flame, and the implication of what was to follow. For us, the outside world had for now ceased to exist and we were in a silent and secret circle of profound import.

For a split second the cloth hung suspended over the tip of the lighter's dancing flame and I'm quite sure that we were all hoping in that frozen moment of time that a true miracle might occur, for the lighter to go out by an unexplained gust of

air perhaps or, dare I even think it, for the cloth to simply not burn even as it was bathed in the high temperature plasma being applied and rising from directly beneath it. The heat of the man made flame met my aunt's tear soaked miracle cloth and suddenly, in a rather brief but unexpectedly bright burst of light, which made me draw my hands back and apart from each other instinctively, the little square of white cloth from Romania burst not only into flame, but sublimated completely out of existence leaving behind only a thin, twisting tendril of black residue floating in the space the cloth had previously occupied. The sound of our sudden and simultaneous inhalation of breath accompanied the burst of heat and light, and then, for what seemed a very long moment, there was utter silence among us. We watched the cooling residuum twist with a graceful agony on the prevailing currents until it had completely dissipated and was visible no longer.

I looked at my sister, whose eyes were extremely wide. As for myself, I felt extremely foolish, as I knew that the cloth would burn, I needn't have actually burned it to prove it to be so and yet I had, destroying my Aunt's expensively acquired prize souvenir and perhaps her faith as well, and for what? My sister and I both looked over at Aunt Dee, worried perhaps that she would be angry, hurt, or so disappointed that she would collapse on the spot, spiritually if not physically. She too had been watching the black remnant of her holy cloth as it floated

away. Then, with the same countenance of serenity born of faith fixed upon her wonderfully composed face, she gazed upon us both and said, with complete confidence and composure: "I guess Mary got the piece with the tears on it."

Poetry

This is a Battlefield My Dear

Teresa Bergman

"This is a battlefield my dear…
whatever are you doing here?"

"I have come to walk among
the dying."

"There are no dying here, you can see
I fight, I am strong."

"Then let me offer a kiss to this
courageous soul."

As the Lady in white bends down
the soldier offers his head for
this sweet blessing and vaguely notices
Her pristine gown
and wonders where She has been.

"Fear not brave heart, I will
watch over the ones you love."

He slowly raises his eyes to see
Her smiling face. The soft
outline of wings grace his sight and
a quiet "Thank you" escapes
his lips before the bullet
meets its mark.

Professors

Teresa Bergman

They all sit there so *knowing*,
So *sure* of themselves, and
So *refined.*
The lofty words they use
They do not know the feeling,
the meaning, if you will.

Vaulted above the likes of me
By their own powers
of divination.
They claim their haughty airs
are proof of their enlightenment,
Which should be taken
as the ends of truth.

"Do not discover your own,
only tell me what I
already know!", claim
the Truth Givers.
I will dash their claims of perfection
and unleash a seed of doubt.

Residual Requiem for Recurring Relinquished Relics

Louis Clausi

Now I think of them and they are only gone again.
I got the bubble, in the middle of my abdomen.
But things float up now and again, the bubbles almost full.
Possessions are no things to cling to but the memories ardently pull.
A sill full of sallow reflections.
Things that seemed dear to me.
They are hungry when they show up
and shuffle to the front for my memory.
Things I remember at such an early age,
the scatter of 45's, cards and drawings
around my room so oddly placed.
All those little things in having
where my character was shaped.
I remember the bike I had at the age of 15
to the zither and the citar I had hardly ever seen.
How easily things could get lost in the house of Dr. Pal.
although he was a Dr., I still can't find them now.
There were books, cassettes and clothing
Ideas and thoughts and friends
some things important, the list just never ends.

As time went on the things piled up
they threw me for a loop
Like that time I messed up that audition
for the Blue Man Group.
sometimes leaving scars
there were paintings, poems, animals and cars.
Then it came to musical things
like drums, that Roland Spd8, two banjos and the accordion,
Flutes, Guitars 4 tracks, and that freaking violin.
The 150 tapes that got stolen with music from my teens
Canes, Plants, Posters, with plenty in between.
More than those possessions are decisions of the past
I thought I got over the tormenting but
sometimes they just last.
But now I face the truth and I know that I don't mind
No use in regretting what now I will never find.
One day my energy will cease and I will no longer be
and the loss of my possessions could only set me free.
My mind does window-shopping
as I waltz through what I explore
and I know that if I were to obtain more things
I would only be inviting the potential of losing more.

Swingin' in the Tide

Maddy Adams

Through the pitfalls of time
losing a job, running missing the line.
Love at its worst
just lust a hormonal curse.

We are swingin' in the tide
by the Oceanside
cause nobody's life comes planned.

So some are rich
and some are damned
like me
in this world I see
no useful reason to be
just energy
that lives and dies
no matter how hard they cry.

So I think
before my ship sinks
how a man can change mortality
but doing this I drift farther from reality
cause it makes a man's mind hurt
to dream the nothingness of 6 feet in the dirt.

But wait,
why don't we create
a way to make
us immortal.

A cloning machine to give a time porthole
by making young bodies for our aged minds
'cause neurons can live long, so scientists find.

Creating in effect a human's gold years gold,
no arthritis, wrinkles, or hips easily broken.
Just a wise mind in the fresh flesh,
after this our brain power will be the test.
to see if we find new environments for our growing population
or curing cancer and world relations.

We are just swinging in the tide
so I find
living light—before dark
can it shine?

And make our little worlds forever
with a catchy slogan like "Die Never,"
for a futuristic company
in specialization of human cloning.
Selling hearts, and legs to those in need,
making perfect clones from a perfect seed.

But some say never disrespect
another man's dreams and intellect.
Someday, something may happen
and those in doubt, they'll be nappin'.
In a perfect world—God will save us all
but we need to think out this thing before we fall.

Alcohol's Proof

Erin Turner

With the shades pulled down and pain as captor,
emptiness echoed against the faint light
while innocence crumbled on filthy floors.

Father's beer-stenched whip reminded of chores,
and suicide's noose became much too tight
with the shades pulled down and pain as captor.

The alcohol's proof equaled endless sores,
and the offspring struggled with a lost fight
while innocence crumbled on filthy floors.

In sober times, to his daughter he swore
that some day the family would unite
with the shades pulled down and pain as captor.

Exhausted from lies, she uttered no more,
prepared for the time when she would indict
while innocence crumbled on filthy floors.

Just as she promised, she declared war
as bullets linked them that vengeful night
with the shades pulled down and pain as captor
while innocence crumbled on filthy floors.

Pillow Talk

Leslie Claus

You woke up that morning
and said, "I have to go now...
(you had an epiphany)
for the last twenty years
I've lived someone else's life."
You weren't kidding.
And you left
your shirts and pants
hanging in the closet
with your shoes lined up
waiting for you to choose
which ones you'd walk out with.

I woke up the next morning
and said, "Now what" to your pillow,
the indentation of your head
still visible.
First I rearrange the furniture
and put pictures face down on closet shelves
to be dealt with another day

and smoke five cigarettes for every cup of coffee.
That night I play pool by myself with your favorite cue
singing I Will Always Love You
in my best Dolly Parton voice
and drink a whole pitcher of martinis
called Sacred Truth
hoping that I might actually discover it.

Candy

Sasha McBrayer

She walks by and smiles like we're old friends
Candy
"Did I speak to you?"
Am I so beneath her that she would not remember a conversation with me?
Candy
I shake my head in the negative
I think to myself that she's confused
Candy
She offers me a bright orange square of paper
Candy
Now I see... She wants me to vote her queen
Candy
This is my name, this is my face, this is me being pleasant to you
These are my eyes covered in make-up
Here is my name and where you will find it on the ballot
Candy
"OK," I say with a smile
Knowing you would never vote for me
Knowing that should you win, you'd become queen of
. . . Nothing
Candy
"Oh yes, would you like a piece of candy?"
"Sure . . ."
Candy. . .
I have no desire to walk to the polling place
I have already forgotten your face
All I remember
Is a piece of candy
In my pocket.

The Game

Sasha McBrayer

Everything was a game
And the game was everything
There was nothing outside the game's realm
And winning was as important as breathing
Your whole body served your will
And your will was golden and forceful
There was no overreacting
For the game was life itself
You took yourself seriously
And switched sides
If it meant you'd survive
There were weapons
And there were hiding places
Some days we ran forever
And hid so hard our bodies became fatigued
Anticipation fluttered in your stomach
And it made you want to scream out with singing laughter
The enemy could be as twisted and as cruel as your nightmares
You'd do anything not to get caught
You'd use any excuse to run
But eventually the sky got dark
And mom called you in for supper
You'd play another game of war
Tomorrow.

Gorgon

Chris Burchette

Medusa shedding,
"old habits die hard"
skin after skin, layer after layer. Sometimes those snakes grow back
a concept stolen from Lazarus. Medusa laughs at the concept of a Christian myth,
her eyes green with envy and contempt.

Sometimes in her cavern of ivory she dares to gaze at her reflection,
Her greatest fear is herself,
The Midas touch. But did Midas ever turn himself into gold?
She studies herself,
blood dripping from a jagged scalp, hair stained crimson,
a root of torn snake poking from the mesh of skin and scales. Her beauty returns but as the legend goes sometimes those snakes grow back.

Medusa frightening,
"old habits die hard"
rumors beget curiosity,
curiosity begets stone,
stone people never talk,
they just listen.

Mariah and her Fancy Red Scarf

Ryan Clark

My favorite time of the year is when I
See the scarves floating
Above my head, like a moth
Last Thursday, flapping in circles,
Trying to escape the cold,
Lying between Harris and Macon
In a backyard garden,
Holding the scarves
For my wintertime wonder in red;
I chase them and dance,
Swinging arms, jumping,
Oozing peppers, broken squash;
From a bag on Broughton
For coffee and a cheesecake muffin;
Candy-apple red, frayed and fancy,
For my live-in lady friend

If I were Set with Wings Ample Enough to Fly

Louis Clausi

Zeus held his hands high
with the stealth of an anvil set by his side.
Pressed opaque behind his shoulder,
diligent spread of thought
tracing hands stretched
to reach for a mushroom cloud
without the reverberation.
Intent to fly as I am flying.
Lofty sojourn, out in the open with the elements,
a bit more of a breeze in my hair.
The sounds in my head, soft like a pan of cotton.
Cupid's soft hearth of cirrus held straight to ice skate
behind the faces of Dali, Davis, Dunn, Pastorius,
Beethoven, Sunshine, Fonseco, Teller, Gandhi, and Bugs Bunny.
I want to fly along side Super-Man,
along side Wonder Woman,
along side a carrier pigeon.
I want to catch the glare of Wonder Woman's wristbands,
let my eyes graze on the sunshine you can see peering through her invisible jet.
It will prevent the breeze through my hair
but at least I can still see the air below me.
Behind the breaks of jet trails, soft hugs, the Michelin Man,
boomerangs, butterflies, children diving for balls,
women balancing baskets, dog's ears, flying back,
sitting in a teacup, and turtles upside down.
Me waving, turning, sitting, flying,
the land below me in an assimilated city haze,
sun across the cabin,
chills on my toes within every cloud.
Its own slope,
wings,
glazed back in the softest hope,
still for moments.
In the air,
waning while I fly.
At your hip I turn, like a whale on helium wings.
Lifted like the elements we breathe and a rabbit's run.
I fly.

Metals Sent from Greece to America

Eric Verhine

"listen to the rest of the story. 'All of you in the city are brothers,' we'll say to them in telling our story, 'but the god who made you mixed some gold into those who are adequately equipped to rule, because they are most valuable. He put silver in those who are auxiliaries and iron and bronze in the farmers And other craftsmen.'"

From Plato's *Republic*

I, being born silver, attend a near
and meager college, for which mom and dad,
likewise silver, disburse their assets dear,
to pattern me into a bourgeois lad.

While walking to the car, after my class,
I pass the bronze men, toiling at their sites -
The proles - who never gave no dead rat's ass
'bout Smith's or Marx's fiscal insights.

Once home, we beaten bronze and silver knaves
do much the same: we couch our selves and watch
the shadows live on walls within our caves,
reflections dark of gold folk without blotch.

And yet, when you read Plato's famous lie
and chide those false inequities, you sigh.

The Breaking Point

Erin Turner

Blindly I begin my studies from a purity burning within,
restlessly waiting to execute that fateful fire of wild desires
distancing me from the always annoying educator of grammar rules
and formulas, catapulting the start of my college career toward catastrophe
marked first by the drink and then by the pill and then the crushed pill to make its way
up the canal of my nose polluting my brain in a speedier fashion as I had no time to waste
since descending to undiscovered depths required that posthaste method, and once subordin
I could only look up from the pit I had hallowed, and with eyes upward, I could evade incoming
so I sought to extinguish the yearning fire of Vogel's dependent heart, and I unearthed
the kindling for a fire in the head, so Tess and Ligeia became oxygen for the flames
in my mind while my souvenir singed heart seared my youth out of necessity
to spark my impending end, which was never meant to be figures of grams,
ounces, and quarters, but rather a rhyme, meter, rhythm, and form; therefore,
I sharply continue my studies from a scorched site so to better see,
not from my crouched position in that burning shelter as before
but rather from the blackened spot where I now stand.

Meditations from a Mountain

Ryan Clark

I climbed from the depths of sorrow
Whose clambering chains grappled my soul.
Once enveloped in the depths, I sought refuge in the
Ageless sun.

I looked from the mountains of salvation
Whose authenticity I questioned with fervor.
Twice upon the mountains I sought refuge from the
Ageless sun.

I drank from the waters of purity
Whose clarity saturated my thoughts.
Thrice swam the ripples, I sought refuge with the
Ageless sun.

Now, I lie as a stone gleaming the reflection
Whose wisdom and beauty I sought.
I look upon the ageless sun and, alas,
I can look no more.

Untitled

Donald Stapleton

Dream,
awake to pain.
Walk to the shadowy
ashes that reveal
nothing.
Drops of liquid
from my hand,
not Blood,
not Red,
bleak, like the color of
soul.
Cry, cry out to
the night.
Search for Halos
that shall not hear.
Tears fall on dreams
unanswered.

Protestantism

by: Eric Verhine

After huddling for refuge into the cowl and cloister,
The first twelve months when the Devil remained peaceable,
The daily prayers seven times over and the assiduous meditation,
After first saying the mass when the Infinite
With a Holy, Ogerish Face seized his spiritual shoulders
And shook him to bony, bloody, grated knees
In righteous fear and hallowed trembling,
After the strenuous sojourn to the Eternal City
— HAIL, HOLY ROME! —
A month of venerating shrines and bones and holy relics,
Of appropriating all the spiritual resources and bargains
That the Eternal City could offer his beleaguered soul,
And after ceaselessly shedding emaciated tears
Over and over and over the Hebrew and the Greek,
And beating importunately on his dear apostle Paul,
Martin Luther refound the Faith, and God.

and as if you,
american pastor,
comport with God.
you, who've never
shook when flipping
open your Bible.
you, who've never
trembled while
passing around
the Lord's Supper,
the wee plastic
cups half-full
of grape juice,
the bite-sized
wafers.
you, who request
a "love offering"
for spending cash
on your vacation
to Cancun.
you, who read your
Bibles in English.

Trick from the Hat

Maddy Adams

And the burning Bush
said to the setting sun,
"I hope around you come."

And the Arab Prince
with a trillion cents
was mad at the other world.

And the time ensued
and the armies brood
marching around the world.

And they burnt their flags
and wound their rags
around a burning fool.

And all between
and all who see
struck for ever more.

Jihad they cry
to the burning sky
I hope the end will come.

And for pride they cry
for all that die
God Bless America.

And all between
and all that see
struck for ever more.

Roman candles
and bottle rockets,
proud soldiers
and those in office.
Nobody cares to
and nobody wants to
stop it.
But yet someone
knocks on the door.
Peace ringing the bell.
A dove flies by the window
and the war burns in hell.

But yet someone
knocks on the door.
Peace is ringing the bell.
Put away all your weapons
tear down this evil spell.

Love is knocking at the door.
Why don't you step right in?
Lead us through the dull,
show us where to begin.

Life can come to you only if you try harder than that.
Love will come to you for things smaller than that.
Peace is the only way you can pull the trick from the hat.

Relative Individuality

Eric Verhine

Trained mom and trained dad train Timmy.
Trained mom speaks and points
until Timmy speaks their speech and gets their point.
Trained mom speaks and points, "duck."
Timmy gets the point and speaks their speech.
Then Timmy sees a chicken.
Timmy speaks and points, "duck."
Trained mom knows Timmy did not get the point.
Trained mom speaks and points, "chicken."
Timmy gets the point and speaks their speech.
Trained dad acts in front of Timmy.
Trained dad does the acts and points
until Timmy acts their acts and gets their point.
Trained dad pees in the "pot."
Timmy pees in the "pot."
Then Timmy pees on the grass.
Trained dad knows Timmy did not get the point.
Trained dad whacks Timmy.
Timmy gets the point and pees in the "pot."
Trained teacher trains Timmy.
Trained teacher trains Timmy to write.
Trained teacher writes writing on the board.
Trained teacher writes and points
until Timmy writes their writing and gets their point.

Timmy writes their writing.
"Write their writing right, write their writing right..."
Trained teacher trains Timmy to calculate.
Trained teacher calculates a calculation on the board.
Trained teacher calculates and points
until Timmy calculates their calculation and
gets their point.
Trained teacher trains Timmy to read.
Now Tim can learn their learning.

Thereafter, Timothy's instruction serves, as it were,
as a trellis to which the vines of his
dubieties and certainties adhere,
or, to transmogrify the metaphor,
as a rostrum on which Timothy ambulates,
while he carps about challenging authority and
affirming individuality.

Bald Mountain Maine, July 17 2001

Emily Joost

We herded children up the trail, teaching them to look for the white Xs on trunks marking the way to the top. We dutifully told them about not littering and staying hydrated and observing but not touching. We tried to instill respect for this vastness in 15 eight-year-olds. We hushed their chatter and taught them to listen to birds and see squirrels. We said leading was not the most important but being there was what mattered.

Up we went telling them the view would be worth the work. We continued to talk and explain and answer as we rounded the edge of the mountain but when we reached the top, we drew in a breath and realized in a glance that words didn't matter. At that moment we all understood.

Spider

Amy Limpert

Your eyes simulated my gaze,
as I was seduced by enticing illusions -
never feeling your deadly kiss.
Falling into powerless confinement,
trapped as a victim in your web,
in which there seemed no escape.
As you toyed with the notion of consumption,
your prey was left to question its fate.
Drained to the point of lethargy,
my narcotic slumber nearly submitted to an enslaving eternity.
This malignance is your definition of love.
My lips will forever taste your poision.

Mother

Amy Limpert

Mother and child, and unbreakable bond.
One acts as protector, shielding away evil,
proudly watching the life her precious creation unfolds.
The other breathes in life, tackling it with invincibility,
knowing if any danger occurs, her hand will catch the fall.
The initial connection that sustains a lifetime.
Immortality is each other's unspoken dream,
broken as one becomes inflicted with a terminal disease.
The roles begin to change,
the two assume unfamiliar parts.
Tears lessen the pain in their hearts,
clinging to one another, thinking of wasted years.
Always hopeful for another moment, unsure how it will end.
Believe that God hears one's prayers.

Phys. Ed.

Jeremy Windus

Behold this shattered scream,
A vivid scene of scraps:

Here and there a disc is thrown
A stick swung, a whistle blown
In this Hall of false parquet, woefully dull and tragic.
Proud banners emblazon walls,
Retelling conquests and falls.
A little boy cannot climb the ropes.
Instructor aloofly conducts each harried, hurried young child.
Brilliant keys jingle on his belt.
The little boy weeps at the ropes.
Tears that burn hot; hot like rage.
Surging down sad marble cheeks.
The hall erupts in full
Pompeii grandstands of laughter.

The little boy flees from the ropes.
From this moment, this soul-crushing crime,
Beneath a life long-drenched deep in grime.
Burning gently at the back of his throat.
Holding ages of dread within Charon's boat,
Armed with Shiva and an old Celtic Ghost,
Come hot from hell now to fulfill Ulysses' boast,
A mark of shame emblazoned on his chest,
Eyeing the dove's tail once used as a crest,
To collect a promise made / A debt unpaid,
Exacted now through a pound of flesh.
The little boy returns to the ropes.
Thus, as the boy steps forth in this state-
Unnoticed 'till now, unpicked 'till this date-
Ready to swing, ready to kick.
See his face?
Is he sick?
No.
I want to breathe smoke.

i wish.

Vicky Smith

when the whole world sleeps
and the night is vast and empty
as i sit on the front porch,
swinging slowly-
hinges creaking in the dim silence,
bare feet brushing against the cold concrete,
looking out into a cold, alien world:
a solitary being vying for existence
with the blank, faraway glow of the stars-
i watch the embers
at the end of my cigarette
struggling not to fade
into the opaque nonexistence
of a small fire dying in the night-
tendrils of smoke, twisting,
gray and vague,
disintegrating into the crisp air
and forgotten-
unknown except by these blood shot
tired, straining eyes;
and as the last tiny red glow
flickers into oblivion
i wish -
on those stars i always lose against-
that i could believe in you.

time warped letters set in stone

Vicky Smith

Someone tell me how we return to the times of innocence-
back when we were self-assured prophets instead of burn-outs or enemies;
back when forever still stood a chance in hell;
back before we raped the "could-be" until its headstone read "should-have"
in time warped letters set in stone.
I blundered into you and it was the sweetest accident I ever made.
Someone tell me how to get back to that time of chance collision,
someone tell me how to freeze it,
someone tell me how to let us --then know how precious those moments are
before the time perversion.
My clock just chimed "too late" and I have no where to go
in this broad valley of wrecked and burned bridges.
Someone tell me how we return to the times of innocence.

I remember

by: Vicky Smith

the poverty, the sadness.
and how pretty it was. the sunlight through the window on the burdened wooden floor.
velma crying naked on the toilet as i washed her triangular child-breasts with a dirty white cloth
the old woman sitting alone in the kitchen, watching her aching knees swell
in the miasma of heat and rotting food, yelling -thank you sweet jesus-
as velma screamed and sweat dripped into my eyes
the dust mites wandering in the shafts of light leaking into the de-spair-darkness
-from outside
where velma might have been normal
and no white stranger would ever
have to see her naked and
force dirty washrags on her

a quiet (still) day

Vicky Smith

it was a quiet (still) day-
that painful-poised feel
of a liquid-glass droplet
clinging to air and
stainless steel
justabout to
but not quite
yet fall

a cat's *aboutto* *jump*
day
with the sky all
wound up
a
bam!
blatant blue
hurled
between
bunched up clouds
readyto-

a
condensed no
water added saturday and
i smoked more than usual
went to work and

nothing
happened

to justify
the tense blue hue
of the
sky-about-to-spring

and it was (still)
just a quiet day
blue and then black and
"tomorrow, then."
was foggy
and
gray.

the insomniac's play

Vicky Smith

eerie fluorescent light spills from the moon
casting shadows on the paper houses
i stand on a vast stage
with all four corners of eternity
and all the creatures that lurk in their shadows
at my outstretched fingertips-

every leaf is a shadow puppet,
thespians in absurdity theater: the wind-
the cardboard trees don't quite pull off the
the illusion of depth
and every blade of grass is distinct,
cutting the scenery from its low horizon-
the world is breathing on this quiet stage
and i, the actor and the audience,
breathe with it

beneath the expanse of stars caught in still frame
i fold my hands behind my back
for i am afraid to touch something so unreal
and to reach towards unknown lands
behind that building stark against its black background
and i am afraid
that were i to touch it, to reach out
i would discover my self unreal
in the early morning hour of the insomniac's play.

epiphany while scrubbing the toilet

Vicky Smith

I noticed
as I was bent over the toilet,
scrubbing with
a beer in my hand,
shirtless with
my tits all over the place
(and the cat staring
from the corner)
that when I flushed the toilet
the lights flickered-

and when
the window unit a/c comes on
the lights flicker

and when i turn on the vacuum
the lights flicker

and, it seems
every fuckin day
it grows a little darker in here

flickering like bitter christmas tree lights
verging on mutiny:
everything dragging shadows, tugging
in the dark

and I realized, one day,
I'll lift my left pinky
and it will all go black

and, if the cat or I
notice that the light
finally threw its arms
up in despair
and made a final exit-

I seriously doubt, by that point,
that either of us will give a damn.

recipe for a lesson in pursuit of tomorrow

Vicky Smith

take a handful of residual sun gilded memories.
wash in silence and late-night tears.
submerge in never-can never-will dreams
born of cigarette smoke, haunting music
and neurotic pacing.
add a razor sharp sliver of hope
reflected in the eyes
of the drawn pale face
hovering in the side view mirror
on that random drive.
stir to a vaporous sludge of unreality.
sprinkle with bitterness,
bake at 750 degrees on high cynicism,
ice with irony and rage.
eat alone in a house echoing
with the shadows of cries.
swallow despite the lump
in your throat.
sleep.
dream.
wake to an elusive tomorrow
that never seems to come,
energized by the remnants
of what he couldn't take
hanging heavy in your bowels.
remember the taste of a lesson
as you continue through
the varying shades and hues and textures
of existence,
chasing tomorrow towards
a self made destiny.

Art

Naive Knew Better

Sebastian Phillip - Photo

Ocean

Amy Limpert - Digital

Behold Your Life
Jeremy Windus - Photo

Pause

Emily Joost - Photo

Gladys, Deana and the Next

Onica Kitchens - Oil

Hell-Surfer
Jane Boswell

Untitled

Bil Leidersdorf - Photo

Shadow to Man

Chris Dunn - Acrylic

Solitude

Jarrett Walsh - Photo

Fado; Lisboa

Julian Santa-Rita - Acrylic

Earshot

Sebastian Phillip -Solar Plate

Bad Bunny

Sasha McBrayer - Photo

"Samurai: Duty Before Love"

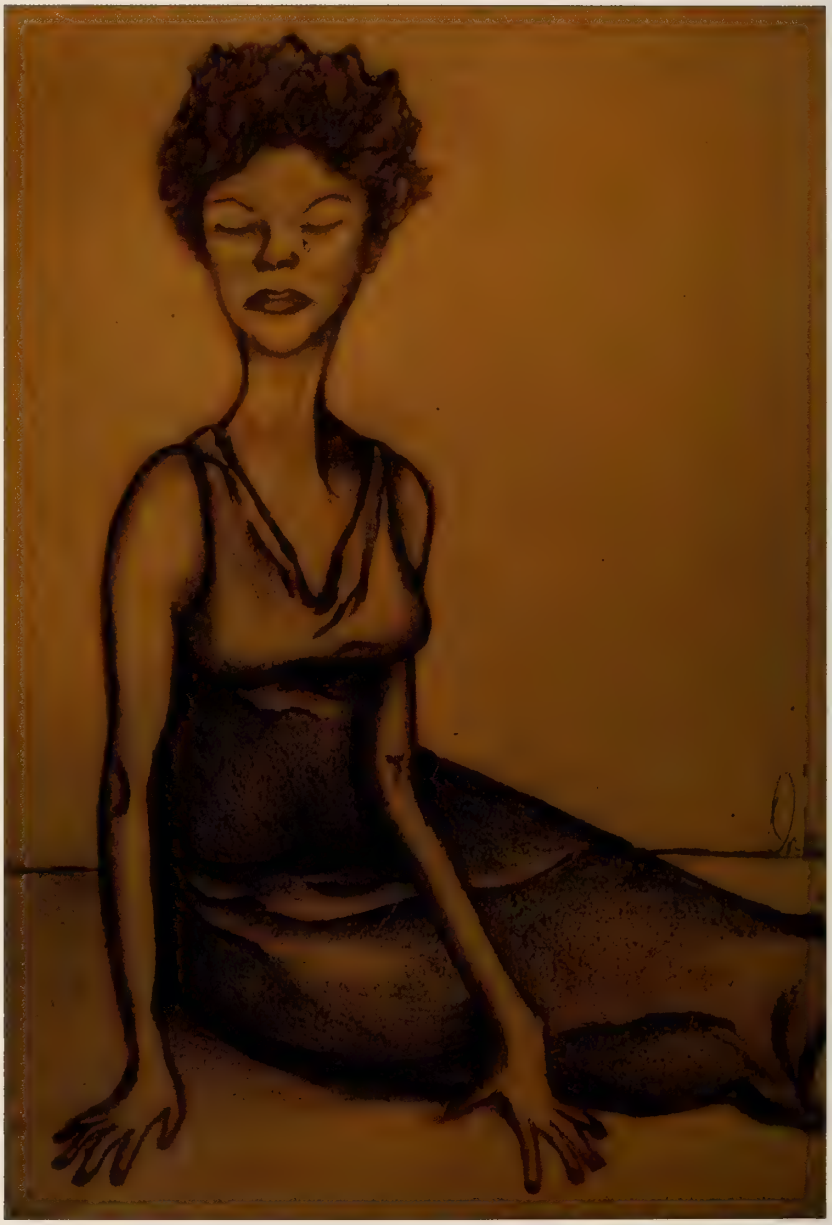
Sasha McBrayer - Print

Untitled

Jamie Stone - Acrylic

Homeward

Jeremy Windus - Photo



Shades of the Past #3

Onica Kitchens - Graphite on Terracotta

AASU
Armstrong Atlantic
State University

calliope

2004

Calliope 2004

Armstrong Atlantic State
University
Volume XX

ARMSTRONG ATLANTIC
STATE UNIVERSITY
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Calliope is published annually by and for the students of Armstrong Atlantic State University. The Student Government Association of AASU provides funding for each publication. The Lillian Spencer Awards are chosen by the editors in each area of art, literature, and poetry, and are given out to outstanding talent in each year's collection.

Submissions are collected throughout the fall semester for the following year's publication. Submissions should be placed in one of the drop boxes located around campus or emailed to the staff. All submissions are read and chosen through an anonymous process to ensure an equal opportunity for every student. For more information on submissions, or if you are interested in working on the staff of the 2005 edition, please contact Dr. Christopher Baker in the Department of Language, Literature, and Philosophy located in Gamble Hall.

What was any art but a mold in which
to imprison for a moment the shining
elusive element which is life itself- life
hurrying past us and running away,
too strong to stop, too sweet to lose.

-Willa Cather

Consider Icarus,... Admire his wings!
Feel the fire at his neck and see how casually
he glances up and is caught, wondrously tunneling
into that hot eye. Who cares if he fell back to the sea?
See him acclaiming the sun and come plunging down
while his sensible daddy goes straight into town.

-Anne Sexton

Letter From the Editor

While collecting submissions for this year's *Calliope*, I noticed that many students had a great deal of apprehension about other people viewing their creative work. With shaky hands, students from all different disciplines presented me with creative offerings, much of which had never before been shared. While we as a staff sat and pored over the stack of submissions, we were overcome by the immense amount of talent and vision that had been laboriously worked into each piece. With each story that kept us turning from page to page, intent on discovering what the end had in store, and every picture that we sat mesmerized by, we were reminded of the way each one of these students is brave. Like the mythical Icarus, these artists were brave to take a chance, to take their stories, photographs, paintings, and poems out from the hiding places where they had previously been kept. Poems once kept scribbled down in an old journal, stories used as outlets for emotions to which the spoken word cannot do justice, and photographs that were originally intended only as part of a classroom assignment were handed over to be shared with the artist's peers. It takes a great deal of courage to begin a creative career, and that is precisely where many of these authors and artists are: the beginning. *Calliope* serves as one of the first steps in the creative process for what may be some of the most talented new minds we may ever know. As a staff, we were proud to be able to read and select from this year's submissions. We are thankful to the students that took a risk and allowed their peers to share in their talent. James S. Kunan once wrote, "I get the idea, sometimes strongly, sometimes not, that I am involved in purposes not strictly my own. I understand that a lot of other people feel the same way, and since some of them are writers, there is a movement in literature which expresses this idea. And things go on." Whether it is in art or literature, I do believe there is a movement, a movement in which every person featured in this year's edition, including its readers, is a part of. It is my hope that this year's Calliope will serve as a creative outlet in which things may continue to go on.

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Sands, Stephanie
Untitled
LeSage, Curtis
Last Flash at Dawn
Farr, Bob *
Stones
Adams, Emily
Untitled

* Notes the winners of this year's Lillian Spencer Awards.

Emily Broome, Untitled, silver gelatin print

The Parade

Amos Stevens

The ring was a small gold boa constrictor choking his hand. Saul was over the bathroom sink tugging the stubborn ring. Even the thick glob of Vaseline could not release the ring from its uncomfortable grasp. There was no pain from the clutch of the ring, just annoyance. Its minimal weight was enough to bother Saul. He raised his head from the porcelain sink just in time to glimpse his reflection in the large oversized mirror. Sybil's glaring makeup lights blurred the tiny fissures given to him by 45 years of life. He moved his wet Vaseline covered hand to the small white towel to the side. He had done his duty for the day. He had forced the ring upon his hand and had worn it to one of Sybil's events. He had taken the stranger out to validate his charade to the crowds. Now it was time to put the ring back in its small, silk shroud, but it wouldn't come off.

Today, Saul spent the day trailing Sybil as she made the final changes to the St. Patrick's Day parade. He went from table helping to pick out pastel green from evergreen and viewing the crudely made elementary school floats. He hated them all, especially the wiry purple Power Ranger one. But everyone was so proud of their child's accomplishment, so Sybil entered it into the parade. Saul stood silently trying not to think of the deformed purple thing. This was Sybil's simple, motherly venture. He did not want to debate the lines of relevance with a woman who kept an empty room in their house for a child they could not have.

Saul clutched his finger once more in a futile effort to release the ring. The ring did not move and his finger just inflated in size keeping the ring in its fixed position.

"Saul, Saul, I need your help," Sybil yelled from the nearby den. Saul retreated from his struggle and walked into the living room. He could already smell the fresh smell of potpourri. The smell carried him carelessly through the hallway. He brushed past the dead, hanging roses, not noticing the crooked state on the wall in which he left them. The pristine eggshell creme walls were new from the living room's annual renovation. Sybil was

reconfiguring the barren wall with all her old pictures but Saul was curious. Sybil was holding an empty picture frame with bronze varnish.

"What Sybil?" Saul asked.

"I am probably going to take a picture of you in the parade next week and I just wanted to know if you thought I should put it above our wedding photo or below it."

Sybil took a large step from the wall and tilted her head. Saul didn't know what she would do if he didn't give her an answer. She would be like the elephant ears or the spring ferns. She would sit still waiting for his motion for nourishment. Saul was the head of the house. These minute decisions were his to make. Saul never appreciated Sybil's oversimplification. Saul knew he could say to the side of the wedding photo, but there was never any deviation from Sybil's choices. She would echo the same question until she got her answer. Before Sybil could ask him again, he quickly picked his finger from his side in a blind guess.

"Above."

"Above? But don't you think that will be too high? I want people to see you leading the parade."

She had to remind Saul. Saul felt the familiar knocks of fury beating at his head. In an effort to keep the vein coursing down his head from exploding, he deliberately tried to forget. While he was at the refreshment table spooning pineapple punch into his cup, Sybil had volunteered him to lead the parade. Later that night he returned to her side to learn of what she took the liberty to do. At that moment he had felt his pulse pounding blood into his stiff body as he stood there holding back his hand from releasing the sticky, red drink all over her silky white dress.

The image of her silky white dress ruined helped silence the pounding. Saul knew his untamed frustrations would do no good. Sybil could not understand. He didn't want to confront her pity for him. Her vain sigh could not help him. There would never be any questions of why there were no children captured in time on her wall of memories. He had no room in his heart for her pity.

"People will see it better above the wedding picture, Sybil."

"Yes, I suppose you are right," she said. "I am going to put another picture closer to the door. Maybe the one where you are carrying me out of the church. Do you

know where it is?"

"In the spare bedroom," said Saul.

Saul knew the picture. It was centered in an old plain frame. He had suggested that she put it in the barren room. It was a time when he was ignorantly joyful. He was so proud to be stepping out of those high wooden church doors, the first breaths of new, crisp, winter morning air piercing his lungs. It was a perfect wedding. Rice was thrown. Doves were released. There was no fury then, just anxiety and pride. Under her veiled face, he saw a comforting smile reaching towards its highest limits with tears escaping the joy of her eyes. Her frail hands trembled in her thin white gloves. She was a beautiful bride.

But that was all shattered. The doctors would give him the cold, hard news as he sat motionless on the table. Saul was doomed to being a purposeless husband. No picture could capture Saul's hollowed heart. He no longer had a forward purpose in his life. His name was the only thing Saul could share with his wife, nothing more.

...

Saul was just about finished with the Windsor knot in his tie when Sybil rushed over to the mirror to spray on some of her perfume. In Saul's life, every social event was preceded with a dinner. The parade was no exception. The dinner was at Peter Roman's plantation. Peter Roman's was large for the five children he had. Every time he and Sybil visited the mansion, Sybil hugged his children. They didn't remind Saul of children, just empty voids. One time when they all ate dinner at their own ebony table, Saul noticed that all moved their forks and knives in an almost mechanical way. This never alarmed Sybil. Sometimes table discussion would deal with whom the children were going to marry. Saul always stared at his food and joined the children in their mechanized eating. From time to time, he would hear giddy laughter or melodic sighs from his wife, but this was never more interesting than the meatloaf.

Saul heard the gravel crunch beneath the Lexus's tires. The long, manicured stony road was not long enough to hide the imposing view of the Roman's house. It was an old Victorian plantation house with smooth marble columns surrounding the outer rotunda. Sybil gingerly

stepped from the car cautious of the stony driveway. Along the trip, Saul had noticed her desperately trying to save her yellow sunflower dress from wrinkles. As he exited the car, Saul noticed that she had failed in her efforts. There was a collection of small lines edging their way across her back indicating where she had sat. He could feel a smile edge the outer rim of his lips.

They made their way up the small steps of the stairs to the large oak door. Almost sensing their approach, the youngest of the Roman's children opened the door. Saul stared into her empty eyes looking for a joyful youth, but all the apathetic child did was stand aside and allow Sybil to pore over her.

"Welcome, Welcome," Peter said. Jeanne, go check your mother," Peter directed to the child. Sybil followed her small niece as she marched back to the kitchen without the slightest hint of a slouch in her back. "Would you like something to drink, Saul?"

"No thanks," Saul said. A waft of liquor indicated that the bar had already been open.

"I hear you're doing the parade thing this year?" asked Peter.

"Yes."

"Well, I'll be there," said Peter. "All the kids are doing something in it." Peter always had a way to remind Saul that he had children. They were always there as he entered, ate, and exited. They were Peter's trophies. He always had them positioned in the right place. Perhaps, it was for Sybil.

"They say you'll be riding one of my horses."

"Yes, which one?" Saul asked, thankful for the diversion from the children.

"Goodwill."

Peter was a horse trader and half of his expansive plantation was molded to suit the purposes of a ranch. Just as Saul was going to ask to see the horse, Jeanne entered the room.

"Mommy says that dinner is ready."

Saul followed the doll-like girl into the grand dining room. Each one of her steps on the hardwood floor was perfectly synchronized like a metronome. A reflection of Saul in his corduroy sports coat appeared in the large gold-framed mirror on the other side of the room. He casually walked past his image heavily hued with a white light by the large ornate chandelier. The room's new

furnishing included a table that was almost as long as the room itself. No matter how many times they refurbished the house, they could not get rid of the sulfur smell left behind by the well water. The Romans' children sat as straight as their dinner utensils. They did not mutter a word as dinner was rolled out on silver carts. Sybil took pleasure in serving each of the children. She often reached over the table to make sure Michael had enough vegetable or gravy, speaking to him in annoying decibels and begging for a reaction. When everyone was settled and the plates were passed out, Peter Roman ordered Michael to recite a dinner blessing, which he did without so much as a misplaced pause.

Peter muttered something or another about his hunting but Saul gave up on Peter's slurred language and full mouth. He was focused on the old ballroom mirror, which portrayed Sybil gleefully smiling as she questioned the children. He could make out her questioning them about school and about what they were going to do in the parade. They were part of the few children that were chosen to wave on the floats. Their pale mother sat as quiet as a corpse as the children cracked under Sybil's enthusiasm. The glimpses of lively children reflected in the mirror. Saul saw these kinds of questions as her nourishment. Saul knew her reaction was more of a caring aunt. The smiles of the normally quiet children were as close as she would ever be to being a mother. Saul thought this was the reason why Sybil dragged him to these dinners and forced him to lead the parade on his brother's horse.

...

Saul walked past the crowded gates of Erasmus State College to the quad where floats were tightly packed in, waiting to be released onto abandoned streets. He could hear each individual trumpet warming up its cold brass horn. But that wasn't even enough to drown out Sybil's voice.

"Make sure to hold onto the ropes, Saul. You don't want to pull out your back."

"I have ridden a horse before, Sybil."

"Well, you never know what can happen."

He could feel the anger building up within him. The cold weather outside hid Saul's red face. Saul wanted

to tell her to shut up but he was still coping with the green and purple uniform that had been chosen for him to wear. He was not the only one. The Roman's horse was decorated with frilly ribbons and a ridiculous purple skirt. All the girls from the elementary school had braided its mane. Peter allowed one of the school groups to paint shamrock tattoos on its velvet legs. Still the majestic horse stood calmly as if unaware of its appearance.

"Well she is the best one I got," Peter said as he threw the saddle over the horse's arched back. "She's gentle with riders," Peter continued.

Saul kicked a few pins of the horse's skirt as he mounted. Sybil reached down and picked up the fallen pins. The horse sighed as she gently reapplied the pins back onto his skirt.

"Make sure you wave, especially when you pass Lincoln Street," Sybil said with the camera hanging on her neck.

Saul tugged gently at the reins to direct the horse from the front gates. The horse took easy, calm steps to avoid the ignorant parade participants in the quad. Saul enjoyed the clunking sound the horse's shoes made on the cold pavement. The crowds parted to the sound of the incoming horse. Saul exited the large metal gates of St. Erasmus to the first stoplight. The band assembled behind him filling up the empty space. Saul could hear the Drum Major ordering, "left front, left." Shortly after, the band blared its first stanza of the march.

Saul moved down the street cautious not to tempt the horse's generosity. The appearance of the horse did not affect its tame magnificence. With a raised, cupped hand, Saul marched down the street as if Donatello had envisioned the horse's equestrian grace. Saul appreciated the horse's tolerance and its grace. He hardly recognized that he was coming up to Lincoln Street. He could barely see Sybil ready to take a picture as he passed the yellow blinking stoplight. He turned to the camera just enough to pose for the picture hoping that Sybil would be able to get it sitting behind the tall man in the front row.

There were a half a dozen flashes coming from the side of the rode when he passed. He thought that Sybil's flash had to be at least one of them. Then suddenly, without warning, a young girl jumped out into the road with an orange pin.

His horse bucked wildly from its rhythmic course to

avoid the small, innocent girl that had impeded its proud march. The horse's nostrils flared up as wild as its marble eyes and cast Saul to the rough cold pavement. His awkward purple hat fell and rolled somewhere into the crowd. There was a clutter of random metal parts scraping together coupled with the large disarray voiced by the mighty low brass from the marching band behind. Saul could feel the pain of every individual stone lodged into his side and face. The cadence of his heart pounded into his skull and fury engulfed him. He arose to his numb feet anxious to inflict pain on the girl who stood with her mouth gaping and her arms lying lifelessly to her side. She did not move as Saul grabbed her by those arms and put his face close to hers.

But then he saw. Those two pearly eyes held an image of Saul so small, so shaded by the dark abyss of her pupil, but at the same time so truthful to its portrayal of detail. There was no facade protecting his face and there were no social lights shining in the background of her eyes. Nothing could obscure the details presented in those cold, dark, fearful pupils. Between those wiry black eyelashes and wide amber spectacles, he saw a man entrenched in his own bitterness, his own self-guilt, and his own self-anger. This child who had only wanted to pin her gaudy orange pin on the horse's purple skirt couldn't hide Saul's heartless soul. He could feel her racing pulse through those strained arms and could see the glistening dewdrop sweat making wet tracks down the side of thinly ridged eyebrows. Then slowly a single shining drop fell from Saul's mirror.

Saul gently released the child from his cold clutches. Her small clammy fingers dropped the orange pin and she quickly scurried back to her crying mother whose shrieks of horror were clouded by the band. Saul leaned down and picked up the pin in hopes of returning it to its owner but it was too late. The child had disappeared in the myriad of bodies wearing blue and green fabric.

Saul looked at his now calm and composed horse standing as if it had never been frightened. It sat still bowing its head in a majestic manner.

"Would you get going already?" cried the impatient Drum Major. By then, the members of the trumpet line had already raised their horns and begun to play the march.

Saul's mind filled up with a million replies but none

seemed to funnel its way down to his mouth. He quickly mounted the ornate horse without the aid of any bystanders and rode down the street not realizing where his purple hat could be.

...

Saul recognized the hallowed gates of his alma mater as he exited from the parade. He wandered around the campus in search of his old bench. When he found the bench, he hardly recognized it. It had lost its black finish. He plopped his sore and bruised butt down on the bench. He felt the snag of every old weathered nail but his legs' relief was enough to coax the uneasy pain.

Sybil interrupted; rushing towards Saul, her heels pounding the pavement with a random meter.

"Where have you been? I have been looking all over for you!"

"Here, just here."

"Oh, all right," she replied. "I heard about the horse. Are you alright?"

"Remember when we first met?"

"What?"

"You know it was somewhere over there by the campus chapel."

"Well, the chapel isn't there anymore. They built a new one over there."

"Yes, yes they did," replied Saul. "You were over there doing something or another."

"Oh, I was taking a vote for the parade. Either you could vote for—"

"Yes, exactly," Saul did not want to hear another vote-by-vote analysis of the colors of the parade that year. "Well I have something to admit."

Saul looked into her vivid green eyes. They were so full of life and content. She arched herself up for Saul's next words.

"I am sorry," said Saul.

"Sorry for what?"

"I am sorry you are an aunt and not a mother."

"Saul," Sybil said, her eyes turning into glassy marbles.

"But you're my husband, Saul."

She turned to him and embraced him. He hugged his wife back inhaling the deep perfume. Through her frail frame, he could feel the gentle cadence of her heart. He

felt the gentle patter of her heart speaking out to his reminding him of a cool, crisp, winter morning that he had once experienced.

Abyss
Sean Kymalainen

So many passages,
With doors I can't count.
Where's the end of the maze?
Where's the top of the mount?

The confusion that rules,
While I search and I weave,
Lends a pause by the door,
Though my heart says believe.

Down a blind alley,
There is a dead end.
Which way is out?
What does this portend?

Eyes that don't see,
And ears that don't hear,
Although my senses are dull,
I possess mind-numbing fear.

From whence I have come,
I haven't a clue.
Where I must go,
Is what is my due.

The doors have been barred,
With no lock and no key.
I cannot get through,
I cannot be free.

Little by little,
Eyes that grow dim,
No more to be said,
A fall by the rim.

Broken Bough

Jason Breneman

The bus stopped where Stocksdairy road met Flowing Well long enough to open its door and rid itself of a single passenger.

"Just like Mrs. Scott used to do," thought Silas Stocks as he stepped through the vortex of dust and diesel fumes in the wake of the groaning, impatient machine. "Only then the bus was yellow instead of white."

He cinched his green duffel bag tight around one shoulder for the mile or so to the old place, not even pausing to wonder at the row of new houses recently built up on the cleared land by the paved road, to his right as he faced forward. He pressed on down Flowing Well, eyes fixed somewhere between the dirt in front of him and the horizon above.

The same familiar odor of honeysuckle sweetened the still, humid air he strained through puffy nostrils. To his left the yellow flowers dotted a mass of tangled green that slid over and around trees, swallowing the rotted wire and oak fence posts. Though no one had tended that land in several years, the honeysuckle still never as much as touched the ground on the other side of that old fence. Instead, a bare, tangled mass of black roots grasped the barren gap of orange sand between the fence and the road.

He marched on, kicking up faint whitish rust-colored dust over black boots. To his right, scattered voices of children wove through the remaining pines not yet cleared and sold behind the row of neat fenced-in yards. He could hear them laughing at him playing, each in his own shiny pen.

Something about it all, though, failed to reach him. As he trod steadily on, he acknowledged none of the familiar and foreign place he passed through. He wasn't even really sure what would meet him at the end of this road he had walked down so many times before. This time there was no one else here with him, and certainly no one he wanted to see who wasn't in jail or underground.

He thought of his brother:

I remember . . . I was younger . . .Josey was just

three or four... He got in trouble for refusing to pick up his messy room. Momma had tried everything: pleading with him, yelling, threatening punishment; Joseph just laughed when she spanked him. I was in the yard playing with a few G.I. Joes when the old man came home. I heard the door slam as he entered, and his raised voice as he demanded for Momma to tell him what was going on. I heard him get louder. He was going to find Josey and I knew that even he didn't know what he would do with him. ...Their three detached voices: Joseph still refusing to obey, my mother pleading with both of them, trying to stop the situation, and my father's booming voice rattling the old house and carrying out, slowly muffled, over the trees.

I remember wishing that Joseph would just quit, that he would just do what he was told. But of course he wouldn't. You could hear my father just snatch him up. The first couple times he hit him, you could hear nothing but a dull thump over my mother's screeching voice; not a sound from my four- year -old brother.

But then I remember him breaking, like we all eventually did, and letting out just a slow, dim whimper, which didn't stop; it seems like it hasn't to this day. Every time I looked at him I heard it, and would be always back in that day, alone, in the yard, crying in the mud.

—

His brother was grown now; he hadn't seen him since he had joined the army and left this place for what he thought would be forever. "Shit," Silas thought to himself, "Seven years. . ."

Silas reached the beaten driveway and his eyes fell on the faded yellow house. It looked smaller than he remembered, and quiet. The old shed still stood back behind the house, before the great oak. The steel cattle barn was still there too, defiantly standing between the shed and the oak. The rusty streaks on the sides of the metal, twisted and torn with age and weather, still shined and little, *like the...*

The cold breath of the place he had forgotten swirled around him, splitting his thoughts and passing through his gut, spinning itself into a cold, hard ball that pressed against his knotted stomach. A part of him fought against the memory he should have seen coming. Looking

on at the place for the first time, it came back to him like a ghost:

The old man was shaving with a pearl handled straight razor he had had for years. He listened half-heartedly to his wife's end of the conversation with Mr. Perdue.

"She said what? ...Touched her how? ...But she's only ten years old! ...You can't honestly believe that! No, I'm sorry, I just have a hard time believing my Silas... No, just, please, let me talk to him first."

Straightening up, he bit his lip and clenched his fist as the woman's words reaffirmed what he already suspected. His fist shook, and the metal blade against his face drew a slow bright stream of red over thick foam...

...Like a furious beast he invaded the room where the two almond-haired boys sat, blankly watching television. He gripped the bigger, rounder of the two by the scruff of the neck and yanked him from the room, heels kicking and dragging across the wood-planked floor. The younger followed, crying out and punching at his father's legs in protest. The man kicked at him, then threw the other at the screen door, out in the yard, and followed after him, fueling himself with cursing affirmations of the righteousness of his anger; muttering both sides of the argument since the boy remained silent, staring blankly ahead. Blind with rage and absolutely determined, he resumed his grip on his son and continued on into the October dusk.

"Where are you taking me?"

"We're going to settle this."

"Settle what? How?"

"Oh, I'll figure out something, I damn guarantee it."

The man's face was still smeared with a foamy lather from the shaving job he quit, and the white foam gathered with a furious sweat, pooling and bubbling around the corners of his mouth as he cursed and spat through curled lips. Silas could hear his brother's cries through the torn screen door, and by them he metered the distance his father had dragged him out into the silent dusk. He felt his weight bear against his father's beast-like frame as it gaited, ape-like, along. He could see himself dragged like an old burlap sack of peanuts by his father's dark gorilla arms. Through the autumn light escaping, he caught a shimmering glimpse of a metallic edge in his father's furious red clinched fist.

Outside himself, he couldn't remember feeling anything. Only the gaping metal grin of that damned cattle

barn, laughing at him, and his father's shaking red arm swinging over him, cutting them, back and forth, back and forth...

—

Supposedly Josey did it; finally killed him, according to what word still got around. Met him after another one of his drunken weekend binges. Right as he was stepping out of his truck, Josey caught him across the head with an axe handle. Beat him so bad, the cops had to ask Josey who he was. *After what the old man did to Ma, I guess he had it coming.* Silas heard that when the cops cuffed him and took him away, he was smiling; he was smiling the whole time.

"Damned Josey, you got more balls than me."

He walked around the old property that called itself his home. The house was a wreck of timber, old paint, electricity that tempted fate and the fire department with the fact that it was still standing. Around back, in the old shed, things were vaguely like he had remembered them, only scattered now and blanketed in the dust of neglect. Vines wrapped 'round the building, but rotted inside for want of light. His eyes took a moment to focus through the dust and dark, then led him across the floor to the old wood burning stove, up to the mantle above.

There, on the rotting wooden shelf, between the two musket balls, white with age and covered in dust, sat the old brass belt buckle. Its shiny patina cast off a greenish-gold light. He took the metal oval in his hand, catching the glare off the afternoon sun. He felt the slick, oily finish that didn't rub off filth on his hands; unlike anything else in the tattered shack. On the mantle, behind where the buckle had sat, a finger had scrawled out into the dust: "For my brother."

"That's just like Josey..." thought Silas.

Silas stood there for a moment reflecting on the buckle that he and his friends had found in that same place not so many years ago. It was their treasure then, an artifact of time past that was all their own. When they looked at it they felt some kind of source that they didn't understand but could tap their roots into.

"That was all just stupid kid garbage," he said to himself now. He thought of the buckle then in the hands

of his father, swung on the end of a belt at him. He remembered the rage within him then; the hate he felt for the old man. How he had vowed that when he was strong enough he would do something; he would eat the pain that bastard brought into the world.

Now his demon was gone, following in death the woman he sent to eternity before him, leaving on this earth just the two brothers: one in jail and this one, here, now. He felt around within himself for something that hurt, some kind of fresh pain about the whole situation that he could take and hold as some righteous justification for anger that he so terribly wanted to feel. But there was nothing there in his whole cold body to hold on to. Josey had done it; the old man was dead. *I went on forever with just that old man to hate, and nothing else. Now, what do I do? What happens when there is no hate anymore, just an empty sickness?*

—

Silas unloaded himself onto the greasy wooden workbench and untied and removed his black leather boots, dusted now in a reddish-white powder. He sat then together under the bench, familiarly knocking against an old wooden box.

"The same...?"

He grabbed the rope handle and flipped the box onto the floor. Tipping over, it spewed its contents out amongst the dusty and rusty nails. Through the mess tumbled a cedar case, carved in a pattern as familiar as his fingerprints. He popped the latch and twisted it open.

"For my Silas." The yellowed note fluttered to the floor. From the case he gingerly lifted the soft yellow chain, listening to its slight serpentine whisper as its links softly fell along in tandem. A jewel at the end of the chain glistened like a beetle's back, lit up and made of water.

Silas knew his mother had always wanted a daughter; she had told him so. Just the two boys were all God and her husband had given to her. When the day came that she knew she would not bear any more children with that man, she sat it in the case and gave it to her eldest son; there, alone, away from his father or his brother.

"This will be for your wife, someday," she had told him, back when "someday" seemed the same as eternity.

"It was your grandmother's. She was an old Creek

Indian, you know. Her people've been here since before the trees and the rocks, even." Silas held the delicate chain in his hand. He let the links slink down through his fingers, as if on their own accord.

"They met De Soto when he came up the Flint River. Did you know that? She gave me this necklace right before she died; Lord knows how she got it and kept it hid."

His mother sat there for a moment with a grin and shook like a house of cards. Silas looked at her and knew she was in one of her moments, when her heart was on something far away from what she was saying. He watched her eyes well up a little, then as she looked off and down at the floor.

"Your father's a good man, she whispered almost only to herself, "He's a good man." Her repetition was not lost on Silas. Even at a young age, he recognized her actions for what they were: the weak words of one who dealt with the world she hated by contriving one that wasn't there.

She moved her eyes back to Silas like she was waking up again to the world she was in.

"You know, besides me and Josey, this is about the only real proof that the woman ever graced this earth. Now, you keep this somewhere safe; I want the next person in the world who sees this to be the one girl you want to give it to. You understand?"

"Yes ma'am."

Silas set down the wooden case and wrapped the golden chain three times around his wrist. He brought the dark and glimmering stone up to his lips and kissed it.

"Sorry to let you down, ma."

—

Silas kicked open the door and stepped out into the cool autumn air. He took in the sight of his old house: the torn screen door, the galvanized steel tub they used to swim in. He turned and looked up the hill to the great oak. The rope he had hung up himself swayed hypnotically in the breath of the early eve. The tire was long gone; now, only the tattered end of rope fluttered at him like a horse's tail after flies.

He stared at it as he walked up the hill, towards the tree. He remembered how the acorns used to scrape and pierce his tender feet when he and his brother used to come up here to play. He used to come up here alone,

cradled like a baby in the old oak's branches.

He thought of a long time ago, in the tree *happy and alone, climbing in its great gnarled branches. I can spend all the time I want exploring and staring at the ants as they course around through the ridged bark. They crawl over my hands and arms and they do not harm me. I do not worry about what is going on with people and things elsewhere, and I couldn't even see the ground below if I did bother to take my eyes off the branches or the dancing shadowy shapes above. Instead there is just a notion of a faint green sea beyond me.*

He used to lie on his back on the great limbs, letting the whispers of the light drift through the leaves as tickle his face as he drifted off to sleep. "That's what I want," he thought. "To sleep."

In the tree, his now callused hands felt the same ridged bark of the old familiar tree. His arms carried him mindlessly up to the branch he had climbed up long ago and hung that rope himself, in the face of one of his father's many drunken promises. He inched away along the crooked, mossy branch, feeling the wind whisper through the leaves.

His hands found the end of the rope on the branch and pulled it up. Unnoticed, they felt at its thick, woven braids, then he quietly coiled the rope three times under his chin. It felt snug and tight, like a hug from an ancient ancestor. He felt the warm in their arms, and he trusted it. He let his eyes close and his body go limp as he lay in the branch.

He held his head back, feeling blood rush suddenly to his head. His eyes flickered shut as he felt the peace of the whispering breeze and the last warm light of the sun through the swaying branches. Upside-down and quiet, he released his grip from the tree.

—

He never felt the rope snap him like a whip and the unforgiving coils constrict after each faint, labored breath. Still, he did not struggle against it; he wasn't even aware of it. Neither did he feel his senses dull and his cursed memories whisper away, forever torn as his soul flickered and whispered away like a vein of smoke from a snuffed out candle, finally peaceful at home.

Clearview
B.J. Whitley

I never really noticed
you were not there
but now everything is clearer
and I laugh out loud
and you couldn't really handle this
a love like mine is hard to take
I'll not be yours any longer
as you slip so soundly away
into the clear view...

Steve Berg - Untitled silver gelatin print

Inspiration
Maddy Adams

In response to John Braine's statement:
"You must never wait for inspiration before you write.
It isn't that inspiration doesn't exist, but it comes only with writing."

Inspiration, well inspiration is
Why I started writing.
As an adolescent sitting in
a boring math class with
a pencil in my hand
my emotions booming from
pubescent hormones.
My mind stirring from anger.
-I hate my dad.
-I hate my school.
-I want to laugh.
-but that ain't cool.
Inspiration, well inspiration
Didn't strike me to take math class,
I was forced.
And in being forced, I loath
To do numbers.
To force writing, to force
Myself to write, well what
Do I gain, force is not
Fun, force doesn't make
Me want to do it now or
Later or have it right.
To force means to make contrived,
Plastic like a dictatorship.
It's not iron- It has
No heart- It's not individuality,
It's not me.
And most of all it's not
what comes natural. And
Nature is beauty not for

Its perfection but how
It grows effortlessly
Spiraling out to the world
Being itself, being individual
Being free to have those
Imperfections that make
It die or make it
Genius to live through
The next age.
Inspiration, well inspiration
Is emotion
Emotion is individual
Individual id freedom.
So Mr. John Braine
I'll wait.

For I don't write for you
Nor do I write for she or he
I write for myself.
I write when I want.
And I don't care if I'm good
Nor do I care if I'm bad.
The only reason I
Write is for enjoyment.
And if I don't enjoy it
Then I write for school grades.
And it just so happens
That the only time I enjoy
Writing is when I'm inspired
By emotion- not that I
Make false emotion
Through fake inspiration
Through fake writing
Through fake flaking
Through plastic and yarn
And smoke of an old man yawn
Strewn across a wall like spattered paint
That makes no picture
Unless it's fixed and makes everything
A comet twisting in mad directions
Flying across the universe
No perfection in circles
But perfection in ovals
And crash explosion
Bits flying and splattering

Across a wall no pattern
A moon crater ruddy from
Underlying plates, twisting
And turning, making moon
Earthquakes- rumbling sound
Waves that slide through
Space in a perfect circle
Except for the small pulsing
The waves make, as they fly effortlessly
Through the vacuum until they
Hit an object
A planet, a comet, a sun,
An ocean. The sound waves
Make ocean waves- waves that
Spiral through a dolphin's sensitive
Ears- waves making more waves
A gentle rustling that hits the
Sand. Movement of conch
Shells on the beach. A man,
A woman-love- and the intense
Feeling of space, the ocean wound
In spirals of one shell to one ear.
So yes, Mr. John Braine
I'll wait.

38

Solitude

Stephanie Swinson

Scoldings and reprimands whizzed through Toby's mind like rocket ships. *Alex was supposed to be here three hours ago. He promised we'd play today.* Tobias Stevens sat irritably on the front porch of Sunny Brook Orphanage waiting for his brother to return from his paper route and play catch.

Toby and Alex were identical twins. But to Toby, they were more like two halves of the same person. They often had that crazy twin stuff happen to them: Alex would skin his knee three blocks away and Toby would fall over with unexpected pain, or someone at school would ask a seemingly abstract question and Toby and Alex would answer the same thing at the same time. It freaked other people out but Toby was always proud. He and Alex would just look at each other and laugh while everybody else stood around looking confused.

Despite being so much alike, sometimes they were completely opposite. For example, Toby was right handed and really good at math; but Alex was left handed and he could draw anything he saw, and make it more beautiful than in real life. That's why Toby liked his two-halves-of-the-same-person theory, because together, they made up the perfectly rounded person.

Even their names made up a total person. According to their mother, he was the most wonderful person who ever lived-Tobias Alexander King-Alex and Toby's great-grandfather. At one time he was a tall, strong man who stood with dignity and confidence. Their mother used to comment on how much Toby and Alex looked like her beloved grandfather with their fire-engine-red hair and buttery skin.

Toby sat on the edge of a squeaky wooden rocking chair waiting to see that familiar bright red hair come around the curve. He strained to see all the way down the clay path looking for any sign of his brother's return. Everything seemed to converge into a single pinpoint of darkness, and Toby was in a constant battle of losing and

regaining his focus. He anxiously twisted and prodded his baseball glove, stretching it and balling it back up again. Tobias was beginning to worry about his brother. He couldn't remember Alex ever being so late to play catch.

Toby and Alex were sent to Sunny Brook on January 17, 1943, the day their mother died in a car accident. They were eight years old. Their father had been killed at Pearl Harbor only two years before, and they had no other living family members to take them in. They got used to a dormitory type existence with communal television rooms, activity times, and even shared showers. It wasn't so bad because there were never a lot of kids there; only a handful of regulars and the occasional new kid. There were a lot of babies brought into Sunny Brook, but they were usually either adopted or sent to other orphanages around Wyoming where they had a better chance of being adopted.

Toby and Alex kept to themselves for the most part. By the time they were ten, their roommate Frankie moved out to live with some uncle that the home had found in Florida, so Toby and Alex had a room to themselves. They had a few friends at school, but Toby didn't like many people messing with him and his brother. He felt that nobody else could understand what they had known. None of the other kids at school even had a clue that life could take away your mother and fling you into a world of generic cruelty, all in the same day. Nobody at the orphanage could understand the bond shared by twin brothers who were more like two halves of the same person than separate people.

Alex didn't mind people as much as Toby did. He would tell jokes to the boys and draw pictures of some of the girls. Toby could maybe understand talking to some of the guys, but he thought he never would understand Alex's attention to those stupid, prissy girls.

That's why it really shocked Toby when Alex asked the orphanage director about a paper route job that was posted on the downstairs bulletin board. "Alex, why on earth would you want a job?" Toby asked bewildered "Don't sign us up for that. We'd have to get up at like 5:00 in the morning. Are you crazy?"

Alex's eyes were simultaneously sympathetic and frustrated. "I didn't sign *us* up, I signed *me* up. And I won't have to get up early. Mr. Baker said I could deliver papers after school."

"No way. You can't do it after school! When will we play catch? How will you have time to get your studies done?"

"Look Toby, I promise that we'll play catch after I get back from my paper route every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday Afternoon." Alex placed his hand on his brother's shoulder. "This is just something I have to do... you know...on my own." A response stuck in Toby's throat. He had wanted to tell Alex that he didn't know; he had no idea what Alex was thinking. He wanted to say that he was afraid to be alone. Afraid to lose the only real thing in his life, but Toby didn't know how to say what he wanted. So he just smiled down at the old wooden floor and shrugged his shoulders feebly.

As Toby waited on the front porch, he replayed that scene in his mind. He tried to imagine what he could have done differently to talk his brother out of the paper route. It was the first time Toby could remember his brother ever letting him down. Toby felt the pang of separation as he realized that they might be growing apart. *Don't think about that,* Toby told himself, *concentrate on the game.* It was getting late and Toby was afraid that there wouldn't be enough daylight to play by the time Alex got back.

Toby was interrupted from his thoughts as he heard a squeak behind him and the front door slowly opened. He turned to see an old man wobbling out onto the porch. "Hi Tobias. We were all about to play cards and the nurse told me to see if you want to join us."

"No thank you. I'm waiting on my brother" was Toby's reply.

"That's just fine, Tobias, but maybe you could wait inside while you play a hand of Gin with the rest of us." Toby glanced up wildly. He'd been warned against persistent strangers. And he couldn't figure out how this one knew his name.

"I'm sorry Mister. I'm not supposed to talk to strangers," Toby replied taking note of the old man's grotesque ear hair and toothless grin for future identification.

The old man wobbled closer and sank slowly down into a rocking chair. "Look, Tobias, I just want to be your friend."

Toby looked away pretending not to hear the old man for a second. He considered running inside for help;

but he didn't want to get caught up in a lot of commotion and miss his brother. So he decided to stand strong.

"I don't need no friends. I got Alex. That's all I need."

"Fine." The old man shook his head as he eased out of the chair and started back inside. Just before he opened the door, he turned back to Toby. "Your brother's not coming, you know?"

How did that crazy coot get in here? Toby wondered. He thought again about telling some of the caretakers, but quickly reconsidered, deciding that the old man was probably just someone's grandfather. He settled back into the hard rocking chair and resumed his watch for his brother.

Toby sat on the front porch for another hour before finally deciding to go back inside to his room. It was 6:30 and already almost too dark to play catch. *Alex must have gotten caught up by some giggly girl. He is probably sitting there right now, drawing her picture instead of getting back home to play with his brother like he promised.* When Toby tried to get up, he realized that his limbs were stiff and his muscles ached. He grunted as he pressed all of his weight down on the handles of the rocking chair, finally catapulting himself to standing. *Gosh I guess I've been in that chair longer than I realized. I'd probably be too stiff by now to play catch anyway.*

Toby made his way back to his room. He was stomping and grumbling under his breath when he ran smack into a lady who worked at the home. She was beautiful to Toby—very petite with dark brown hair and perfect pale skin, just like Snow White. Toby liked to think that she looked like his mother, but secretly, he couldn't remember what his mother looked like anymore. "Mr. Stevens, where have you been? We're all about to play a round of Gin don't you want to join the others?"

"No thank you Mrs. French. I'm waiting for my brother. We're going to play catch if it's not too late when he gets back."

"Oh," she said quietly with a sympathetic nod. She paused and looked down for a second as if trying to make a decision. Finally she continued "Okay, Mr. Stev...um...Toby. Let's get you to your room. You can rest until your brother returns."

Mrs. French never made him take part in activities with the others if he didn't feel like it. Toby thought that

she really understood him. Because of that, she was his second favorite person in the world, after Alex of course.

When he got to the door of his room, Toby stopped short. He heard someone humming inside... not humming, listening to the radio. He burst in with relief and excitement. "Alex! I've been waiting all day. How did you get by..." Toby stood staring into the surprised eyes of someone who was definitely not Alex. Toby's mind raced, trying to sort through the confusion. "Frankie? When did you get back? I thought you went to live with your uncle."

"My uncle?...Why would I..."

"Your uncle...in Florida. Mr. Baker found your uncle so you won't be an orphan no more. You left us six months ago." Toby stood confused and defiant.

"All my uncles are dead, man. I'm your roommate but I don't reckon I'm no orphan."

Toby's face turned red. *Frankie can't be back. It will mess up everything.* "Alex and me have this room to ourselves now. You got to get out Frankie. Alex is coming back soon and he won't like you back in our room."

"*Who* is going to do *what* to *who*? Man, you talking crazy again."

Toby watched as his roommate reached back behind himself to press a red button on the wall marked EMERGENCY. Toby stumbled as his focus blurred on the big red button. A feeling rushed over him, like deja vu, sickly familiar.

Toby heard a slight ringing in his head as he swaggered to his bed, lost in a cloud that cradled his mind. He fought the confusion to find reason. He strained for something real to emerge from the scattered ideas that were flashing before him. They were speeding up from black depths like flashes of light only to slow to a snail's pace before his mind's eye so that he was forced to live his memories in unrelenting agony.

First he saw his mother's dead body: pale and pasty, encircled by flowers, her hair not fixed right, her lipstick too bright, and the worried frown that her face wore as she lay in that coffin lined in pink polyester. Toby was eight again and he wanted to get in the coffin too. He wanted to hold his mamma until she woke up from her bad dream—or until he woke up from his. Toby watched as the image of his dead mother began to speed up until it was nothing but shooting light again, and it shot away leaving a faint trail.

Behind it there were scattered, sparse images of Sunny Brook; their room, drab green and white walls pathetically decorated with images of Alex and Toby's favorite cowboys; Frankie with his giant nose and thick glasses; playing catch on hot afternoons; Mrs. French; lemonade; Alex's laugh, his cry. Then the memories of Sunny Brook sped up and whizzed quickly through Toby's mind as if they had somewhere else to be.

Then he saw Alex getting older, his paintings, his perfect daughter Emily, his dog named King.... Toby saw himself, walking slowly through a maze of caskets. He could hear the funeral director's voice growing from a faint mosquito's whine to a loud slow drone. He was explaining the merits of the different caskets, specifically, the Ch121—Red Mahogany "...and the body rests on silk lined, white, goose down." *What body*? Toby saw himself, twenty-seven years old, alone except for the funeral director, crying. *What body? Why was...Alex.* Alex was dead. Killed himself. Toby had felt the bullet—as if it had entered his own brain—the second it happened; even though he was forty-seven miles away. He had forgotten. *How could I have forgotten*? With realization came shame for having forgotten; and a tremendous pain, as if he were hearing the news for the very first time. *How many times will I forget and have to remember? How may times have I forgotten already?*

Tobias woke up screaming. His cold wet body was clenched in a fetal position with no other fetus to make him whole. Everything was encircled in a glow of florescent harshness and Toby ached. His stomach felt like it had been ripped from inside him; his chest burned with bitter agony. There were two doctors and several nurses hovering over him, asking him questions and fidgeting around his naked body. But Tobias could only cry. His pain would not allow anything else.

"Mr. Stevens, Do you know what day it is?"

"You were out for a while. Can you hear me?"

Off to the side he heard the murmurs of nurses. "His dementia is getting worse."

In the far corner he watched an old man chattering away to one of the nurses and clutching a cane so hard, his knuckles had turned bright white. "...that's right, Frankie. I don't know why but he was calling me Frankie; and talking about some uncle or something. Then he

started with that Alex stuff again and I did just like they told me..."

A closer, soft voice sang over the old man's speech. "It's okay Toby. We're giving you a sedative. You'll be better tomorrow. We're all here for you." This last voice contained so much compassion and truth, that it caused Tobias to look up in its direction—*Mrs. French... no..., Mrs. Earl—not from Sunny Brook Orphanage but instead from Shady Oaks Retirement Community.* Her face was kind. As she tilted her head to one side, her tortoise-shell glasses reflected the florescent light and Tobias saw himself reflected in them too—not a nine year old boy, but a sixty-seven year old man. His screams turned to sobs. For a moment, Tobias' mind was completely clear. In it was a pure understanding of all of the horror and beauty of life. He was a sixty-seven year old man who had lost his other half forty years prior and was suffering from a mentally debilitating disease. But he knew he'd be happy again, just as soon as he forgot. He sank sadly into a heap. The injection was working and soon he was asleep.

The next morning Toby awoke from a long and deep sleep. He scurried over to his closet and put on his favorite outfit. He picked up his old baseball glove off the floor. He wondered how it got there and thought Mrs. French would be awfully angry if she knew he'd been so messy. On his way out to the front porch, he recognized one of the girls from the female dorms in the orphanage. He stopped only for a second. "Hey Tobias, where are you going? Don't you want to watch The Price Is Right?"

"I don't have time to talk now, Nancy. I got to go meet my brother. It's Saturday. We're playing catch as soon as he gets back from his paper route." With that, Toby obliviously waddled to the porch to await his brother's return.

Megan Stern - Untitled silver gelatin print

Ode to Smoking

Alexxus Anderson

Broken chain smoke,
Nicotine fits, a riot in my blood takes over my brain
forcing concession to a cigarette break.
Florescent lights to sunshine,
boxed life to open air,
air full of the smell of
Newports and Marlboros, Pall Mall's and CTs, scents from Paradise.
The riots cease,
as all go on a fun in the sun vacation where deep breaths of the
air are common.
Great way to get away from the workday
out to pollute myself and the world,
a smoke break.

Jennifer Turpin - "Front of Car" - silver gelatin print

Drive

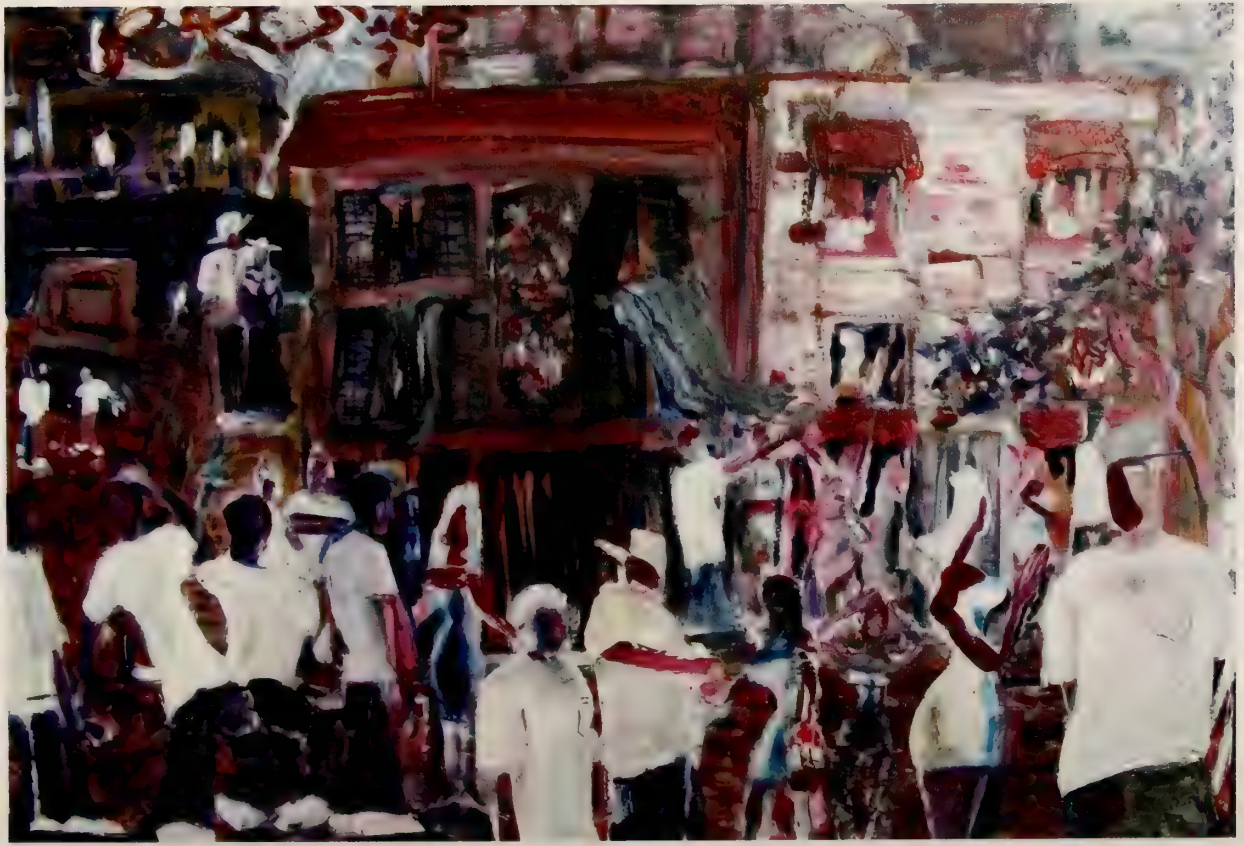
Shawna Silverman

It's late, but you drive. The highway is an alien landscape awash with jewels this moonless night. It has seen no other cars in the blue-black Georgia morning. You have crossed north, then South Carolina, one then the other with grim resolve. When sleep threatens an open window and a quick smack or two across the face does the trick. For a few hours, you listened to the radio and sang along with Bob Dylan and the Beatles, distracted from your course until the hours wore on and one song slumped seamlessly into the next. The music is internal now, one song after another from your childhood, half-buried under fresher memories. The band lives only in memory. Your mother knows these bar-worn songs that have never seen radio play or been pressed to vinyl. She loved the man who crafted them and plied them roughly from stage to stage for twenty years across the Southwest. His callused brown hands held hers the night you were born. Tonight you drive to hear his voice, all gravel, and honey, and dust, for the last time.

One hundred or so miles ago, you stopped for a rest and a drink on numb legs that seemed to stretch too far to reach the ground. Your shoes were laid upon as gray a slab of concrete as ever graced a tomb. You sat on its matching bench and laced your toes through the night-cooled grass. Silent and intent, a silver garter snake parted a line across the lawn, sending ripples toward your waiting feet. He disappeared beneath you, a flash of pewter skin and bright, dark eyes. Lapping at the dew, his darting tongue might have pulled your songs from the air as they resonated in a halo of tenderness and regret. The little snake attended you as you rose to drive again, framed by a corona of halogen light.

Sleep is starting to seep into the corners of your eyes now, and the salt of your hands just makes them ache and beg to close. There is a pain that radiates from the joint of each thumb inward to the palm of each hand. Switching between them eases this for a moment or two. The highway is a river of obsidian now, running sharp and black with long streams grasping out at the heart of

Ryan Reese - Untitled silver gelatin print



Charles Estes - Untitled silver gelatin print

Kari Hunter - Lori - silver gelatin print

Jaime Kenard - Chinatown - paladium print

Rebecca Sherrod - Untitled silver gelatin print

Stephanie Sands - Untitled silver gelatin print

Curtis LeSage - Last Flash at Dawn - Oil on Panel

Bob Farr - "Stones" - silver gelatin print
Lillian Spencer Award Winner

Emily Adams - Untitled silver gelatin print

America. The tributary that carries you soundlessly into morning leads you down among the sage and the golden pines of New Mexico. It's a long time coming, and the endless expanse of Texas has not yet been broached. Your glance flickers to the glove compartment. Avert your eyes! It's not time yet. A black dog lying dead in the median looks like a baby bear. Your father told you all about the bears the first time he left Pennsylvania and started moving West. They are both the bane and the treasure of the residents in his small town. The story, which might have been true, was of a couple who were picnicking outside of the reservation near the anemic stream that gives the region its name. When the husband looked up from his lunch to see "the biggest damn bear on the mountain," he told his wife to run to the safety of the car, the windows of which had been left down to let the radio play. Hank Williams wailed away, tinny and unconcerned. He'd seen bears before. Abandoning picnic and mate, the woman ran towards the car, and of course, the second bear. The smaller bear was sitting in the passenger's seat eating cough drops and drinking warm beer.

The effort on your father's face to remain stoic and sincere as he told you this story defied human strength, and even gravity. Laughter might just burst through the top of his head, but then you wouldn't know that the tale wasn't true. It's all in the delivery, you see. The art of telling makes the lie real and breathes bears into existence out of the only desire for an audience and to make you smile.

The rain begins at dawn as you approach the city. She was your city once, and there is no need to take this route except to trace the silvering lines of an old scar. The exits slide by, and you turn unexpectedly at the last one. Slowing down is always the hardest part. Seventy and sixty feel much the same. Fifty drags uncomfortably, and at forty-five you must roll down the windows for some gauge of real speed. A windless southern night unfolds its sodden arms around you. You return briefly now to hear the echoes of lost time.

It is said that every house has its ghost here, and they flicker in the windows as you pass. There is something here, behind these cobblestones and bricks; behind these groves of electric light harvested in song. Here is the neighborhood where you stumbled through streets stained in sepia with lamplight at four in the morning. The shirt

you wore was not your own and you could smell the sweat of the black-haired man you stole it from. Your hands still tasted of him, and you did not care that this part of town bred murderers and thieves. It had rained that night as well, soaking you both as you walked to his house and stripped in a squalid bathroom that had seen the worst of too many parties. Candle wax and spent cigarettes littered the floor. You stepped around them to take his hand as he sat in the bath. The water went cold, then hot, then cold again. You talked for hours about frivolous things, drinking Wild Irish Rose and digging for common ground in your graveyards of childhood memory. He did love you in his distant way, as he did hate you later.

You slow to a stop in front of the now condemned house and sniff the air. There is no trace left here of him, or the dark hours spent lying awake in the stifling heat, not daring to touch him as he lay next to you glowing bare in the window light. His power washed from these stones with the wine and sweat. You turn once and head back toward the highway.

An hour behind now, and you speed without thought. The cool of night has burnt away. The breeze hangs almost motionless; your velocity gives it the illusion of a current, but it is thick and warm. Singing helps as you enter the special part of Georgia where radio stations are faint transmissions from dying stars, flitting in and out of range. The recognizable pieces of songs dance in static before you must turn them off before being lulled to sleep by gentle waves of white noise. Your father's songs again; you're trying not to think of the desiccated husk of what he once was. This keeps you awake. His slight frame once harbored a great strength. His eyes flashed razor-straight into yours, belying a keen intellect and fiery pride. Now the doctors draw lines in blue ink on his skin and run poison through his blood. When you saw him last, his huge brown eyes pleaded silently from a shrunken, fragile frame that belonged to a man twice his age. You could not help your observation. A baby bird; he looks just like a baby bird. You drive.

The road is silent and slick with morning before the first stirrings of the working world begin. It is owned now only by truckers, who touch its secret corners and clamor amongst themselves through radio waves. You cannot hear their phantom voices, and there is no music now. You pull out a cigarette and greedily inhale, savoring the

pull of smoke. You exhale in graceful, curling plumes. You throw out the butt and watch as it sparks behind you. The pack follows it. The lighter goes next.

Your stomach, soured on coffee, folds into itself as the traffic builds. You stop to eat when the morning ebbs and the cars crowd either side of you. There is no answer when you call. The machine is not on. You call again as you eat. You call when you throw your spent wrappers in the trash. Pulling out of the truck stop, you know you will stop at every rest area and try to make contact. When you hear his voice, you will hang up. With terrible love you will attend to his last wishes. Promises fortified by blood are not easily broken.

The sun tops out above the trees. There are college students at the next stop, laughing and snorting like great horses. You pick up the phone and let it ring for a long time. His wife answers. It is terse; he is gone. Without incident it seems, and sooner than was predicted. There was a flutter of the eyelids. He did not fight, of course. You leave the phone hanging as you pull away. Speeding back into the lanes, you acquire speed hungrily. Mile marker passes mile marker. Cars are not in front of you anymore. There is no one behind you as you open the glove compartment. The bullets scatter and the gun dances and rolls at over ninety-five miles per hour. He has loved you twice in the end: once by asking you to finish what he could not, and finally by releasing you from your duty. Unsure of what comes next, you turn around at the next exit. You drive.

nazi poets masquerading as gods
to ee cummings
Vicky Smith

i will not use correct capitalization

i will randomly sp ac e wo
rds

i will extol my poor grammar
parading shamelessly across
the page
with

no commas
question
marks

colons periods semi colons

on

ill lump them in the middle of the page like this

...((?!)"";'
!!!

ill eat mary olivers handbook to poetry
as i languish in an excess of adjectives

rolling in my filthy mundane cliche poetics

like a pig in shit

and when i decide id rather be published
than real

ill drop knees open mouth and swallow

for those nazi poets masquerading as gods

This is War Boys

Joseph Ventura

The hot Persian sun beat down heavily on the shiny, metallic transporter: a Fokker-Atlantic C-2. The military insignia and voluptuous woman painted on its belly were eclipsed and simply reflected the white heat. Vapors of mirage-gas simmered up from the hot tarmac. Private Rev. John Von Imple is the first to exit down the stairs wheeled to a tight fit with the large cargo doors. His square crew cut and dark rimmed glasses frame a round, somewhat pudgy face that his parishioners back home synonymized with compassion. Before deployment the whole church was present at the airfield. Where as many of the soldiers, fifteen years his younger, had curvaceous blondes clinging and begging for them not to go, the reverend, like on so many Sunday mornings before, was surrounded by some 150 older men and women with tears of joy in their eyes seeing him off. They carried signs that read: "Take Up Swords for the Lord!," "Onward Christian Soldier," and "Reverend Imple, We'll Pray For You." They chanted "Defeat the Darkness!," "Overcome the Evil," and "God Bless America" as he waved his once bible toting hands to the crowd and boarded the aircraft. The reverend-come-sergeant saw them vividly in his mind as he stepped down the steel stairs; feeling their confidence in him duly, and righteously, warranted.

The smells of burnt chemicals invaded Von Imple's nostrils. As so often with memories, an immediate olfactory distaste that would always be with him imprinted itself upon his mind. Stepping down onto the white tar, gypsy sounds of a foreign, heathen society beat into his ears. The friendly airfield, which his outfit had landed at, was less than two kilometers from the heart of A_Ulaybiyah, Kuwait. The bleating goats and horribly monotone pop music from a bustling, far from civilized, market could be heard from the barracks arranged along side the runway at Camp Doha. The stagnant vapors of helicopter fuel settled over the pale green tents like cumulus clouds over the cattle farms of Samson, Alabama. Private Rev. Von Imple clutched his bible close to his heart, heaved his bulging pack onto his back and hiked over to his super, Sgt. Braun T. Wallard.

The Sergeant sat at a sleek, four-legged, poker table under a dangling low-watt lamp. The forced neutrality of the varying shades of green, which made up the room, was an insult to the color. Green, a color much more comfortably a designator of environmentalists and green thumbs, at home blanketing the naive and gregarious, is pukish and pea-colored in this environment. Here, stamped on everything, dyed into scratchy wool blankets, the energy and purity of its pigments were purged by aggression; its essence lost in uniformity.

Sergeant Wallard, a monster of a man from Dallas, Texas—the epitome of the slogan "Don't Mess With Texas"—sat over an Arabic-English dictionary. It was rumored by some of the men that in Field Training Sgt. Wallard's outfit had been struck dead on by lightning. The men in his outfit were cooked alive. Wallard walked on third degree burns the 22 miles back to base, carrying the only survivor, scorched and ailing, over his shoulder.

His arms were as large as good Betty Torring's roasts, thought the Reverend. For a moment he was transported back home, back to dinner at the parish people's homes, back to Samson, Alabama, to a small white wooden church with only ten pews and standing room. For a moment John Von Imple was lost in the peaceful memories of the events that brought him here in this campaign against evil. That sermon was supposed to be merely a reiteration of the President's speech the week before—that was where it all began. He thought about the vivid descriptions of a weapon-bearing God striking with vengeance the wayward, un-godly ones, the comparisons of the Iraqi people with Jewish people under Hitler's reign of terror, the call, no, the demand to arms that had roused a fire in the heart of the church-goers, so much so that nearly twenty percent of them had enlisted the very next day—including himself, their leader, Reverend John Von Imple. However, Betty Torring had everything to do with his choice. Von Imple was surer of that than anything.

Sgt. Wallard issued the company's bunking orders and left the barracks without so much as a welcome to the green G.I.'s filtering in. His heavy steps echoed throughout the near empty hall and in the heart of each boy's chest. A general wave of anxiety broke over each soldier's mind. Private Von Imple sat on his cot and began writing a letter to Betty, her flowery perfume the only concrete thing still in his head from back there.

Dear Sister Betty, it began, I have left our homelands and traveled to the battlefields for one purpose and one purpose alone: Love. Love of God, love of my parish, and love of my faith in Christ. I am determined to spread the teachings of Christ and rid the world of such awful diversions, veiled in a progression of compromise, as the Islamic teachings. Christian unity will not become a reality unless all churches accept the authority Christ entrusted to Saint Peter and his successors. With the backing of the U.S. military, God will reign supreme again. Unity in Christ is based on following His will and follow I shall. Betty, I want you to know that while J.C. is the only guide I need, the only light I see, the only food that nourishes me, you are my motivation in the flesh. The strength I gain from pleasing you will keep me a good man in the eyes of the Lord or set me apart from other men of the cloth. In Love of the Lord—Yours, Private Rev. John Von Imple.

Later in the afternoon Sgt. Wallard lead Private Von Imple and a few others in his company as tourists into the large city of Al Jahar. With complete normalcy, chickens scrawled across the dirt roads, women masked from head to foot walked in drones with a total sense of direction, and the familiar red, white and blue Pepsi yin/yang tempted consumers in a foreign tongue. The inverted teardrop rooftops of mosques and public buildings sat next to the "Golden Arches" of home, the McWorld. The absolute grittiness of the street carried with it a stench of the familiar along with that of unfathomable filth. To Private Von Imple it seemed as though the market was set upon a dumpsite.

"Good Lord! These God-forsaken people," he whispered to himself.

"Hey Preach— Save ya holy water, we'll need a shower wit it after this tour," hollered Logan Seavor, a wild-eyed, lanky youth from Mississippi.

Logan "lagoon," they called him. He was a drifter, hungry for adventure, hungry to be where the action was. Ever since the departure from Hunter Air Force Base, back in Savannah, Georgia, Private Von Imple had watched him from a distance. He saw in his rebellious tie-dyed t-shirts and untied shoes a lost soul, a lamb to be returned to the flock. He patiently waited for the opportunity God would give him to administer his lesson to Logan.

Logan Lagoon was the hapless type of guy that did things his way and his way alone. He was the type of fellow

who still kept a tape deck in his car—CDs too delicate and ephemeral for his personality. The type of mentality the military both despised but needed desperately; one who'd kill simply for the pleasure of it and kill again without being commanded. The short fuse fanatic that fanatics were eliminated by.

"Keep with ye, a pure heart and clear mind—psalm 52 verse 4, Logan."

"And plenty of .50 caliber, disintegrating, shortrecoil 'mmunitions, right Preach?" Logan said with a smirk. "Kill us some commie, towel heads! Fucking evil gooks."

"Gooks are Asian, dumbass," shouted Robbie, a twenty-two year old military journalist. "...And the Iraqis ain't communist either."

"Boys, keep your voices down. We are guests here. These people, the Kuwaitis, despite their lack of sanctity, have allowed us to enter their home and respect should be shown. 'From the east, great battles of my will shall be fought and blood, like water, shall purge the evil from its heart' Revelations 18:9. 'The Word shall give us victory over sin' Psalm 119:11. Be mindful of the duty at hand," Private Von Imple said as he moved his M-16 to his opposite shoulder and continued ahead of the other five men back towards the barracks.

"Walking bible," the other men joshed among each other.

The open flames of street fires dried large mammals of unknown specification in the slow grind of aberrant chefs turning pit-handles. The foreign chatter that surrounded the American soldiers further emphasized the strangeness of the landscape around them. Uncouth soldiers broke out into Chinese imitations. Old rusted cars, like gravestones, sat abandoned on every corner. The puttering motor of one pick-up revealed life of some kind, a sputtering of dust kicked into the air by bald tires. Three men in green fatigues crouched; huddled in the back of the vintage El Camino. A loud 'pop' like the snap of a snare drum echoed through the dirty streets. As if in a rush of gunfire, the men of Sgt. Wallard's company dove behind large wooden crates for cover.

A white fear shrouded all six men instantly. The bustling of the street seemed to eerily dissipate. Von Imple and Robbie were crouched behind two large wooden crates that partitioned a small rampart off from the rest of the

street. Von Imple clutched his crucifix and softly recited a prayer to Archangel Michael, the protector.

"Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, Oh shit. Not today—I just got here. I'm a gawddam writer not a fighter," chanted Robbie.

"Be calm Robbie and just stay quiet. It's probably just some kids with cap guns or one of those decrepit German vehicles backfiring," said Von Imple. "Logan! Logan? Where the hell are you?"

Slowly peeking above the wooden crate, Von Imple got a view of Logan. The air filled with his hysterical chortling. Clutched in his thin fingers was a chicken's rubbery neck drooping limply like a wilted flower. A rivulet of blood dripped from the fowl's fractured skull. An image of Betty floated up to Private Rev. Von Imple's consciousness. Her soft white features, like an angel's, hazy and round, as if seen through a camera filter, overwhelms him. Her blue eyes smiled at Von Imple. A tear raced down from the Reverend's face.

"Hey preach, ya wanna give the last rites?" asked Logan.

A spark ignited inside of the Reverend. A fire, as if on the pulpit conjuring up descriptions of the wrath of God's return, was set ablaze inside of him. The sterling cross, whose weight was a delicate ounce, burns into his chest. The whites of his eyes are flooded red as he jumps up from his position.

"You Heathens!!" yelled Von Imple as he raced out, lividly, into the open air of the empty market. The almond trees drop their fruit in syncopation with the charging stomps of his army boots. As he held his weapon from the waist he began to contemplate it unloading itself upon the guilty, the damned, the merciless. He imagined the shells from his weapon falling into the dirt like rain. He saw, with each empty casing dropping to the ground, part of the fiery with which his rage erupted extinguish itself. Just feet from Logan he fell to his knees and sobbed into his forearm.

Sgt. Wallard stood with the sore look of a parent's bereavement across his face. He reached out, grabbed Logan by the arm, and tossed him to the dusty street.

"You fool." Came the Sergeant's commanding voice. "Come on, you morons. In here." The Sergeant motioned the men into a small deli.

A large plywood sign hung over the doorway that

read: "Al Salaam" in Arabic. Underneath, in English, read "U.S. Military Welcome". There weren't many of these signs hanging around what was left of the city. The men dusted themselves off as they walked into the small building.

Every brown eye turned to them as the door swung shut behind them. A short bar separated the small wooden tables and the kitchen area. A short man with a large gold medallion visible through his open shirt watched the G.I.'s. No one spoke.

The walls were lined with a collection of religious and food service posters. Faux-gold framed pictures of Jesus and Muhammad hung next to grotesque close-ups of falafels, gyros, and hummus bread. On one wall hung a photo of Mecca. In it thousands of devout Muslims circled the holy pillar and were blurred by the timed exposure of the photographer.

The four men lumbered up to the bar and sat with their elbows on the counter. Next to them sat a small Kuwaiti man with his wife and daughter. The man wore dust infused jeans and Nike tennis shoes, with an open buttoned short sleeve business shirt. His wife, from head to foot, was immersed in a black burqa. Logan, Robbie, and John weren't paying any attention to the parents, however. Their eyes rested loving—maybe even lustily—upon the couple's teenage daughter, Salome.

She sat immaculately underneath the rows of jarred grape leaves, pickled cucumbers, and spicy Baba Ganoush. Her plum colored eyes patiently observed the servicemen. Her skin had a soft glow like the golden Tunisian dates that sat packaged on a shelf behind her. The men were enamoured.

Her father broke their concentration. "You are U.S. military, eh." Said the simple old man, imploringly. "We have respect and trust to give you."

Logan began to speak but Sgt. Wallard interrupted. "Thank you very much. We are happy to be here."

The room shook. A military plane passed above.

"You are hero." He turned to the man behind the counter, "Wilum, pour drinks for my hero friends." The grin on his face could have stretched the length of the entire Syrian Desert. His wife sat distantly. His daughter's face flushed as he continued, "We are with you in your fight against evil. *The Seed of evildoers shall never be renowned.*"

Rev. Von Imple's ears perked up. What was this? A man of God in this barren place? "Good sir, it joys my ears to hear the prophet's holy words from your mouth. I was certain I would not find a Christian man among the lot. And to think, here of all places. Praise be."

The man's composure slumped into the wooden chair. Salome leaned over her mother and father and looked into Rev. Von Imple's eyes. "Isaiah is a prophet of Islam." She said and then relaxed back into the contemplative position she held before.

"You sass that preach, girl." Said Logan as he licked his lips. "Ain't no god-fearin' in her. Where's your costume, sweet thing?"

"She's obviously not a Muslim, Logan." Answered the Reverend.

Salome turned slowly and peered at the Reverend's eyes. Her beauty enthralled him. Slowly her dark features spread out for him in hallucinatory waves like the gas off the hot tarmac. He glared adoringly into her royal eyes. Her features rounded and smoothed out ethereally and Private Rev. John Von Imple sat before his love, Betty Torring.

"Betty" He whispered.

Immediately the young woman spoke. "I refuse the burqa, but not my sweet lord, Allah. The Qu'ran does not say that women must cover themselves completely in public. That is the law of oppressive regimes. *He that ruled nations in anger, is persecuted, and none hindereth.* You fail yourself with such a narrow view of prophets." She pointed to the picture of Jesus that hung next to Mohammed's on the wall. "You fight for yourselves and your own views of the world. You refuse Islam, just as Islam refuses you. Your fear is a fear of truth."

"Salome!" Shouted her father. But, it was too late. The young girl sprang from her chair and was quickly out the door.

The Reverend, Logan, and Robbie were all on their feet. The girl's father reached out and grabbed Rev. Von Imple. "She knows no place for woman" He pleaded with the Reverend whose eyes followed the closing glass door.

He walked towards the door.

"Sit your holy ass down, Von Imple" Shouted Sgt. Wallard.

But, the Reverend continued. In a trance he followed towards the door. Just then, Wilum, ran from be-

hind the counter and grabbed the Reverend from behind. Logan, Robbie, and Gen. Wallard immediately surrounded him.

"You let go of that soldier, chief. Now!" Shouted one of the men.

In the spontaneity of birds taking flight, a hustled scrum of men erupted in the quiet deli. Fists flailed. Anger was mouthed in Arabic and retorted in English. Wilum was out numbered and quickly manhandled into a corner. The Reverend escaped out the door.

Salome stood in the middle of the dusty street. Her face radiated a light out over the glum of late afternoon. A light sprinkle of rain fell ubiquitously over everything. A single drop screamed like a miniature MOAB bomb down from the heavens. It careened through denseless clouds. Private Rev. John Von Imple stood captivated underneath the deli sign and the Kuwaiti and American flags that flew above. They unfurled above him. The tiny droplet of rain—a death shower?—continued to fall. It grazed the outstretched flag mixing with the rusty dust that covered everything. The alchemy of this momentary mixture transformed the droplet of life-restoring water into something sinister, something grotesque. The droplet splashed onto the Reverend's boots like blood.

"Betty." He murmured.

Tears splash into the great reservoir of sand. A prophet stood over a dead man.

The sun cast down Von Imple's shadow, out over the sand like a clock's hand.

"This is war, boys" said Salome, as she turned coolly and simply walked away.

Fatherless Seed
Duc Van Huynh

fatherless seed grew upon a fire
and coldness swept by with a breeze of wind.
living without desire
a child not knowing of any sin.
coming into a world of unknown
with a people of multiple clothes.
taught of earth, sky, and me
and learn that home was a shack
and was born of a fatherless seed.

Helpless
Duc Van Huynh

Seven days breathing nothing
But the smells of rotten flesh and dirt.
Ferocious little beasts crawling
In my eye sockets and under my shirt.
Above, a flower that sheds tears
Dampening my heart.
Helpless to move away from here
And even helpless to say,
"I miss you."

Clouds

Sean Kymalainen

To be floating along,
in a majestic blue sky.
To take shapes by the millions,
to wonder why.

No cares in the world,
nothing to make.
No obligations to meet,
no promises to shake.

To feel such a bliss,
like a soft, feathered touch.
To be so near heaven,
is almost too much.

To glide in the air,
so light and so free.
Ah, to be a cloud,
that is for me.

Everyday but Sunday

Emily Adams

The devil comes to my house everyday but Sunday
And delivers demons made of paper
To a box outside my door
Then he drives a city vehicle to my neighbor

At least we all get the same treatment
So with a sigh, I take his bringing into my home
Where I place them on my counter
And shuffle through them with a moan

Occasionally he brings some less frightening than demons
Like goblins, imps, and the random boogie man
I pinch them at their corners
And throw them in the can

The demons have my name on them
I feed each one with money
I stuff each of their mouths with my sweat
Each demon must be fed monthly
(or they come after me)

In the morning, I deposit them back into the box
Where they wait to be picked up today
Their faithful father is never late
Everyday but Sunday

Soiled
Sasha McBrayer

The used fork sits perfectly balanced
The white handle is clean as a hospital
But not the sharp, shaped metal
Tongs are coated in my last meal
Still tainting the air with lo mein scent
My tongue remembering the soy
I worry for the used fork
Soon it will be sticky, like the plastic it rests upon
Who will wash it if not I?

I Want Your Eyes
Sasha McBrayer

I venture deep, the only one willing to uncover what lies within myself
What do I want?
I want your eyes
Humble, peaceful blue
Solitary and sharp
Decadent but so very simple
Give me your eyes
Just for a few glances at night
Just enough to send me to sleep
To give me those sweet, safe dreams of warmth and freedom

Would that solve me?
Would I be happy then?
Maybe not.
Maybe ... lend me also your voice
Say random meaningless things to me
Say them just so
I'll be content then
I'll be soothed in pretend land
I'll sleep soundly, I swear

For what would I know to do with all of you?
The complete you would be too fine a gift

A thing I could not fathom or handle
So keep to yourself precious son
And only lend me these gems
I swear
I'll never hunt you again.

66

The Essence of Man

Karen Bellflower

O Wretched soul, endure not thy immortal fate,
But do cast aside thine armor that shields thy virginal state.
Reject the holy covenant of heavenly bliss
And embrace earth's passionate kiss.

O, spread wide thy frail pure wings
In search of mortal transcendental pleasures.
Do entrust thine saintly heart and let thine soul
Submit gladly in worldly flight.
Soar beyond the splendid golden gate
To plummet downward into chosen conscious grace.

O, tread ye not where Angles dare
For in this gilded garden lies Cupid's lair.
Awaken thine eyes to see this terrestrial Eden
And surrender whole heartedly to the son of Venus.
Now castaway thy Utopian crown
And sow thy seeds in this fertile mortal ground.

O, Bare thy soft Angelic breast to the fervent beast
And tame not thy savage heart conceived by sinful lust
But do savor the decadent fruit
That was spawn from a handful of dust,
For it is "The Essence of Man."

The Jazz Club
Ilene Cardenas

Enter, enter
into smoke-filled rooms
the soft sounds of pianos
and bases offsetting the
dimness of the room
Languid hands move over the surface of
smooth black and white keys that
obey their every touch
the perfect tempo
of sweet improvisation
filling my soul
music induced sweat
filling my every pore
finishing all too soon
the applause fills every corner
2nd set

To My Mother
Alexxus Anderson

Preconceptions cage in plastic
a hamster's house with no holes
where I suffocate for want of self-expression.
YOU forced ME
a triangular peg into a square hole
cutting off the corners that made me different,
unique,
un-you.
I've walked in your shoes,
your stockings,
your dress,
and you wonder why I scream
MURDER
when I can't please you.
You straightened my hair,
and I suffered with the do,
for you.
Shut my mouth with respect's muzzle,
seeded my mind with self-hate,
pressed the pattern of pain into my skin,
leopard spots you ordered me not to scratch out.
All these things you've done to me,
Mother
and you wonder why I scream
MURDER
when I can't please you.

To My Father
Alexxus Anderson

You are half my reason for being,
half my intellect,
so don't look so surprised that I'm a fucking wreck.
Momma ain't no saint,
but then neither are you,
so how you can expect me to be
is beyond the fucking moon.
you walked away and left me,
a woman to be sure,
but for the self-hate you've given me

there'll never be a cure.
Before you think this is all your fault
I just want you to know
you share the blame completely for this fiasco.
Cause you are only half
and to be whole one must have two.
So before you go,
KNOW
I hate my mother too.

When Girls Cry
Anthony Petrevitch

you wear a plastic halo
it's the thought that counts
watching over me like an omnipresent lover
waiting to comfort should i cry out
forever afraid to slumber
for the fear that i might fall down

you are the angel in my heart
the demon in my head
a crutch i cannot bear
like a monument to the dead
something cut away
like the skin i shed

you hold me like a dream
for you have yet to taste
what will i do
when tears stream down your face
i will laugh
and you will fade
a long lost memory
a testament to the time i wouldn't waste

Messenger of Death

Samuel D. Helms

During the 20th century, America fought in two world wars, two police actions, and several conflicts. For the families of those who serve in the US Armed Forces, the words "*We regret to inform you...*" are among the most feared. From February 1993 throughout June 1996, these words became part of who I was and who I am. During the final three years of my Marine Corps career, I was assigned as the Casualty Assistance Calls Officer (CACO) for the southeast corner of Texas; a region measuring 8,000 square miles. My bible was the US Marine Corps Casualty Manual. This manual covers everything from how I would receive the detailed information of the deceased, to walking the endless sidewalk to utter the words "*We regret to inform you...*" to hearing taps echoing in the background as I handed the folded flag to the grieving widow or parents.

My first assignment came only two weeks after arriving in Houston. The call came on a Thursday night at 10:00 p.m. My heart raced as I drove to the Reserve Center to pick up the message regarding the first casualty call. Pulling the message from the fax machine, I began to read the details surrounding the death of this Marine. As I read his name and unit, my stomach suddenly became empty and hollow. I knew this Marine; he was from the unit I had just left two weeks before. I arrived at midnight in a small Texas town and tried to find the rural route address. I contacted the Sheriff's office to get the exact location of the house. I knocked on the door, but no one was home. I called the house several times, but no one answered. The ride back to Houston seemed like an eternity. My mind kept going over and over the facts, wondering whether I could find the words to tell this mother that her 20-year-old son had committed suicide.

The next day I returned to that home in that small Texas town around 9:00 a.m. As I walked the sidewalk to the door, the sidewalk seemed to be never ending and the door seemed just out of reach. I could even hear myself breathe. What felt like hours to walk took only seconds. Before I could knock, the door opened, and the terror in that mother's eyes became etched into my memory forever.

Those words "*We regret to inform you...*" came so hard for me. I felt this mother's pain. I felt her anguish as it filled the room. I became the rock this mother chose to cling to.

As with most Marines, the world will not find weakness in our armor. For the next three years the casualty calls and subsequent funerals were conducted without a show of emotion, and with only a sense of duty.

During my final months as CACO, the last casualty call of my career made me aware of the impact and responsibility that had been given to me. Late one Wednesday night, the call came for a Marine who had died during a training accident at Twenty-nine Palms, California. He was a 33 year old Staff Sergeant with a wife and two children living in east Houston. It was midnight when I knocked on the door. The words "*We regret to inform you...*" cut the night air and his wife, now a widow, slumped to the floor. A few minutes later her 10-year-old son came out. At first he just looked at us, then asked us where his daddy was. I looked on the wall and saw a picture of a proud Marine in full dress blues posing with his boy; his son. As the child sat in my lap, I did my best to explain that his daddy would be home no more.

The deceased Marine had stipulated that, should anything happen to him and a casualty call were to be made, we were to inform his wife first, and then his mother, and finally, his father. At 5:30 a.m. I drove 80 miles to relay the news of this Marine's untimely death to his mother. As I walked up the driveway, the mother walked out to empty her garbage. As our eyes met, she screamed and fainted. My presence alone was enough to convey the sentiment my job called me to do. For the next hour, as I tried to comfort this mother in her time of loss, all she could say was, "My baby boy is dead." Upon leaving this mother with her grief, I drove 100 miles north to utter these words, yet again, to the father of this dead Marine. When I pulled into the drive, I could see the father working in the backyard. His wife stepped on the porch, and seeing me, walked rapidly to her husband. I made it to him before her. While he walked back toward the house, he began to weep softly. During the long, silent drive back to Houston, I knew the next two months were to be the hardest one for me emotionally.

When the body arrived the following Saturday at Houston's Intercontinental Airport, it was my duty to see that the family was there to accept the remains, and my

duty to relieve the Marine who had accompanied his friend home. The funeral director and I inspected the casket and ensured all of the documents were in order for the burial. Since the death resulted from an explosion, the casket was sealed. The ride back to the funeral home from the airport was quiet and subdued. Once the casket was arranged in the viewing parlor, the mother was adamant about seeing her son. As the family members tried to talk her out of it, she looked at me and begged me to provide her with a goodbye to her son. For a moment, I imagined my own mother asking someone like me for the same thing. Before we, the funeral director and I, would let the mother see her son, we had to be sure the body was presentable. Presentable meant the body was shrouded in a green wool blanket with the Marine's dress blues arranged on top. Once this was verified, the funeral director and I agreed to let the mother take one last look at her son. What felt like hours took only minutes as grief enveloped his mother. I, again, became the rock that a mother could rest upon and draw strength, except this time I was the foundation this mother pulled herself on. I still wonder if she pictured me as her son at that moment she said her final goodbye.

The day of the funeral was planned for and practiced by the other twelve Marines needed for full military honors. The rotunda of Houston's National Cemetery would be full. All family members and 20 Marines from the departed's unit would be attending the service. The hearse stopped on cue. With the skill of surgeons we, the casualty corps, set about our task, to give honor to a fallen comrade. I told my team that morning, "We don't know this Marine, but we are a band of brothers and, by God, we are going to bury him as if he were our brother." This funeral had become personal.

The afternoon sun was starting to cast long shadows as we slowly entered the rotunda. The Navy chaplain began the service and for the next hour we listened to songs and praise from the family and friends of the departed. As the sergeant and I stepped to the casket, the silence was deafening. It was so quiet that I could hear the flag whisper across the casket as we raised it high above our heads. When the first volley of the 21-gun salute sounded, the rotunda filled with sobs. The echoing of the final volley seemed to continue infinitely as Taps began. As the trumpeter help each note just a little longer than usual, the eyes of many combat-hardened Marines filled

with tears. Time seemed to stand still as we folded the flag. Painfully, with each fold, with each turn of the flag, the truth about this day unfolded. I was in this place, given this duty to not only honor the dead, but to give the living peace of mind, rest without worry, and a rock on which to find strength.

As the sergeant and I painstakingly folded and inspected this Marine's flag, we exchanged salutes that our task was completed. I turned directly towards the grieving widow. Today I counted my steps; the thirteen steps necessary to stand before her were never-ending. She had not shed a tear since hearing of the death of her chosen life partner. As I bent down with the Marine's burial flag, she and I looked at one another and began to cry. As I began "On behalf of a grateful nation..." Marines sitting behind her began to audibly weep. As I presented the flag, I watched my own tears fall on the ultimate symbol of our nation's strength. I felt the humility and compassion I had lost during the last three years return.

What prompted the death of my humility and compassion was the very same thing that prompted its return, the death of a Marine; the death of an unfamiliar, but not an unknown brother. As I gave my final salute as Houston's "Messenger of Death," I wondered if the next messenger would have the sinews of rock I had.

"The writer believes that all that can be thought can be written. In his eyes man is the faculty of reporting, and the universe is the possibility of being reported."

-Emerson

calliope

two thousand five

Calliope
2005

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Calliope is published annually by and for the students of Armstrong Atlantic State University. The Student Government Association of AASU provides funding for each publication. The Lillian Spencer Awards are chosen by the editors in each area of art, literature, and poetry, and are given out to outstanding talent in each year's collection.

Submissions are collected throughout the fall semester for the following year's publication. Submissions should be placed in one of the drop boxes located around campus or emailed to the staff. All submissions are read and chosen through an anonymous process to ensure an equal opportunity for every student. For more information on submissions, or if you are interested in working on the staff of the 2006 edition, please contact Dr. Christopher Baker in the Department of Language, Literature, and Philosophy located in Gamble Hall.

All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you: the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was.

--Ernest Hemingway

Letter From the Editor

This year's edition of Calliope marks the first year that creative non-fiction was introduced into the submission process. We found as a staff as we read through the submissions that it was often extremely difficult to distinguish the fiction from non-fiction in the stories. Unmarked and anonymous, each story was presented in the same manner, giving the reader very little clue as to which genre the piece belonged. What we discovered in our reading was that there was a little bit of truth and a little bit of fiction in each work. It is difficult to define where the imaginary begins and where reality ends, and vice versa. After a great deal of discussion amongst ourselves, we decided to present this year's work similar to the last, without designating an area for each genre: fiction, poetry, creative non-fiction, photography, and art. We encourage you to read, view, and experience all of the works in this edition of Calliope as art, all representing a little bit, not only of the life we live, but also of the life we envision.

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Spring

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Untitled

Durden, Jennifer Turpin

Attention

Roll Call

This issue of Calliope is presented in memory of Dr. Jill Miller. An amazing scholar, teacher, and friend, she will be greatly missed, but her presence will continue to live on through the lives and work of her students. Her faith in us has changed us.

Omission

Christi Healan

This hunger eats at me,
a web of deceit I created.
Unintentionally.

Fear shrouds my tongue.
I swallow the words before they...
Escape.

Eventually, lies will consume
the truth with deception.
Unplanned.

A wall of silence hinders
and protects, but offers no
Redemption.

Plastic Mommies

Lindsey Ebner

He is the only person that laughs at my inappropriately timed jokes. He understands humor. Being a flaming homosexual at 16 will do that to a person, I suppose. He called last week at his usual time from New Orleans, which means the party went bitter and he needs my tasteless humor.

"How's the mega-bitch?"

I sighed and rolled my eyes, "Oh, Jason, darling, which one?"

"Which one do we hate the most? Mommy number one or mommy number, huh, what number are we on again? Oh yes, four."

"Jason, dear, it isn't ladylike to hate."

"Mommy Number Four, it is then."

His voice was raspy from hours of drinks and Marlboros. Mommy Number Four. I think I could have my own line of dolls. Each of the four dolls would have their own weapon of choice, hairstyles to match the decade, and of course their smiles would be stretched across their plastic faces with no wrinkles in the corners of their eyes. We simply cannot have sincere smiling dolls. That just won't do. I would have to name the legion of mommies, but no name seems to work for them, because they are all so different. I could name them after my dad, "Zachy's Wives" or maybe "Apron Killers," or I could even honor Jason and call them "The Flab Four." Nope. None of these names will do.

The first doll out of the doll factory was Mommy Number One, the main one, the one that tried to shove me through the birth canal. Poor number one, she couldn't even give birth right, or so I was told. She had to be sliced under the belly button to free me. She tells me often that she loves me more than my older sister because I look like her, and because for the first three years of my life I needed her. I was deaf. She taught me how to speak with my fingers on her lips and my hand making pictures in hers. The years she taught me how to speak were the only years she touched me without anger. I visited her every summer and Christmas until I was fourteen. That was the age the courts in Georgia decided I had a choice of whether or not I wanted to be beaten with her whip of humiliation

and manipulation. She called to say Happy Fourteenth Birthday. She called to remind me of my debt.

"Lindsey, I was in labor for three days. It was agonizing. They told me I might die if I gave birth to you, but I told them to go fuck themselves! I was having you if it killed me, and it almost did. Are you coming to see me this summer?"

"Shit, mom, you shouldn't have gone to the trouble. I mean you could of died and they would have cut me out anyways. Right?"

She showed me her belly scar when I was eight; "This is where the doctors slit my skin so you could come out. You gave me this ugly scar, and now I can't even wear a bikini." Her eyes mimicked her puckered lips as she pulled at the extra skin around her scar. I looked at her face with plain eyes, her eyes, and allowed the corner of my mouth to move upward. "Well, I suppose you should have just left me in there." She looked at me as though I had just proposed she buy me a snake.

Snakes. Oh how Mommy Number Two, the second installment in my doll collection, hated snakes. I am sure I reminded her of a snake and not just because at four years old I thought a garter snake made a great gift. She looked at me like I slithered all around her ankles daring her to touch my scales. Her first husband gave her three boys and I liked to pretend that I was the little girl she dreamed of. She loved taking long bubble baths, but I thought it strange that she would never let me take one with her. One summer while she was bathing away, probably dreaming of me starting kindergarten in the fall, I slithered in and showed her what I had found while playing. A dead bat. Her reaction was shocking. She hit my arm and screamed at me to "get the hell out." I did the only thing I could. I dropped the dead bat in her bath and ran to find my dad before she did. She morphed into the dragon from *Sleeping Beauty* before my eyes. "Run!" I screamed to my legs. I ran through the long hallway onto the screen porch and through the limp door, only stopping when I ran into my dad's legs. My nose still bends to the right from its impact with his hard knees, or so I think.

Later that night my dad ruffled the top of my head with his calloused hand as he laughed and soothed my tears. We ate our Oreos and milk together. I choked on tears and he choked on concealed laughter. I think he laughed the whole night on our couch that was missing

half its cushions.

One month after the dead bat incident I had a big shiny box waiting for me on my bed. I ripped the paper with my teeth and tore with my claws. I thought of treasures, games, Teddy Ruxpin, He-man action figures, Garbage Pail Kids trading cards, Thundercats, Transformers... I was going to explode if I didn't get the box open! God, why do adults put so much darn tape on presents for kids? I tore the box lid in half getting to my prize. Horror. A red denim skirt. A skirt. I knew it was for me, because the name started with an L, but I hadn't learned anymore of my name. My dad slipped on the hardwood floor running to my screams of terror. Mommy Number Two bought me my first skirt. Poor thing. I feel bad now for the way I reacted with such selfish pain at the thought of wearing a skirt. I wonder if she still remembers that moment...wherever she is.

"Linds?" Jason's voice slashed into my psyche.

"Huh?"

"Really, how is she?"

"Well, I haven't stuffed her in the kiln at my art class if that's what you're asking." God, I love the sound of his gut twisting laughter. I didn't get that one though. I got the kind of laughter you give the crazy lady behind you at the grocery store. The particular brand of crazy that wears a rain coat and boots in ninety degree weather and tells jokes about drowning puppies, that's the type of laughter that met my ear.

"Have you talked to her since the fabulous wedding fight?"

"Oh, you mean the fight where my Maid of Honor got confused about her title in the wedding, and thought she was actually supposed to defend my honor? No. Number Four is still sour about the black eye. I am waiting for the yellowish red color to seep in before I brave the visit. By then, she can cover it with makeup, and I can pretend I don't see it." Ah, there it is, that gut twisting laugh. Love him.

"Shit Linds, I wish I could have been there for that one!"

"Oh yah, that's all I needed at the wedding...another queen."

Black eyes. Mommy Number Three, my third doll,

left when I was twelve because of a black eye. Not because of the ones she gave me, but the because of the one I gave her when I got big enough to hand them out too. Mommy Number Three gave me my first spanking. It was with an antique metal flyswatter. I had to pull down my shorts and panties to receive my spanking. After four hard licks, the fragile swatter broke, infuriating her into action. Luckily, because it was the first time I was ever hit, I screamed so loud that she felt bad, my dad ran in, and I was saved. That night my dad and I ate Oreos and milk. We both choked through tears as he explained why I was spanked. I deserved it. I was riding my bike on the center line of the highway that stretched in front of our house. I heard Mommy Number Three yelling at my dad that night: "That monster's spirit needs to be broken. She is fearless. She ought to be scared of things. Damn it, Zack, she wasn't just riding on the center line with her bike. She had her arms stretched out and her eyes closed!"

Monster. I thought of the book I was learning to read, *Where the Wild Things Are*. I squeezed my eyes tighter and entered Max's world. I hung Mommy Number Three upside down from the trees and let the monsters tickle her toes. I danced in my own fox costume under the full moon with my monster friends, I dove into the water and turned into a mermaid, and then I walked out of the magical water and became a lizard. With my suction cup feet I was able to climb and sneak up on the meanest monster, Mommy Number Three. I laughed when the biggest monster started spanking her with a large black fly the size of a football. "AAAARRRGGGHHHH" I screamed and started to climb the trees, which of course were my curtains. I was just about to pounce on her with my lizard suction cups when my bedroom light was thrown on and glowing anger meet my wide eyes.

It took her years to break down my spirit. Many secret beatings had to occur, but finally I had to be put on anxiety medication. Way to go Doc, fill me up with narcotics. That won't have an affect on me later. My neurologist explained the dizzy spells and spots to me years later as being from the idiot doctor that calmed my nerves with drugs. The idiot doctor said I was the youngest patient he ever knew of to have such attacks, at the gentle age of ten and eleven years old. My stomach was torn with ulcers, I threw up constantly, I couldn't poop, and I stopped speaking freely. Only when spoken to by God. My

dad thought it was only from Mommy Number One's manipulation, he didn't know Mommy Number Three's secret. My dad would sit at my bed at night petting my curls and telling me stories. He dragged me to therapists and specialists and speech therapists, but I was tired. I wanted only him.

After Mommy Number Three was forced out, I had freedom from mothers for about four years. I liked the young funky girlfriends he brought home for a short time. There was a thirty something with red, yellow, and orange hair. We listened to the same music. There was one of my teachers. Thank God for that! I would have failed history that year without their fling. Then there was a scuba diver, and she was the best because she was one of those women that loved the earth and all of God's creatures. She reminded my dad what pot was, and I learned too.

Mommy Number Four came when I was sixteen with the mission of turning me into a lady. A lady. I have always liked the way that word sounds and the images that form in my mind. I think of a small petite woman in a soft silken blush dress with a delicate nose and large eyes surrounded with yielding blond tresses, standing enclosed by men of all ages begging for a glance. The dress just did not fit. It was too late for me to be mutilated into a young southern debutant. I had already been raised by a man and several crazy women that people nervously laughed with in grocery store lines. It was too late, but she never ended her crusade; instead, she was more determined. I was told daily I was too short, my feet turned in when I walked, my green eyes were dull, my boobs and butt were too large, and the tangled mess of curls was too rowdy. I never paid enough attention to other peoples' feelings, I spoke to harshly and too quickly, I smiled too much with too many teeth, I laughed too easily, and I always had paint and charcoal covering my forearms and clothes. I was a mess of a person in her eyes and at every moment I was reminded of it. The more she hated what I was the more I improved on all the faults she accused me of. It became fun. We danced back and forth with compromises until I was sure she would give up. It never happened.

"Hey Lin...you've fallen into yourself again haven't you?"

"Uh-huh. Sorry."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"Nope. I think I am going to look for some Oreos. Want some?"

"I wish! I miss you. I'll call you tomorrow night. Usual time?"

"Sounds good. Love you."

I hung up and began my thirty minute search for Oreos and a diet soda. My lips seemed to pout with a mind of their own as mine wandered on. Whether I am hunting for a soda or stalking a stem of grapes in the bottom of the fruit basket it always seems to take me at least thirty minutes in the kitchen. I have to open and close the refrigerator door three times, then I move to the pantry and search with my fingertips, and finally I open and close the freezer three times. My first choice just isn't right, so I move onto the second, and then my third choice and the choices continue to stack on top of one another until I decide I wasn't hungry in the first place. I finally found the Christmas tin filled with Oreos on the top shelf of the pantry. As I ran my fingers over the rough painted tin lid, I thought of the woman that gave it to me. I bet she actually spent time finding the right one instead of giving me one someone else had filled for her. I imagined her picking up several dozen different tins until she found the perfect one. I know she did, because it was covered with my favorite icon of winter: snowmen. I thought of her wrinkling her eyes in the corners without even realizing the skin's slow movement towards her brow. I saw her straight blond hair braided out of her face and her easy pink lips spread thin as she thought of me. I am sure that is how the tin came to me.

Of all these women that have molded me, this one woman, the chooser of the Snowman Tin, stands out as the exception. I won't mold her arms out of plastic or attach a distant smile. I won't stamp a number on her forehead and see only that number when I see her. I will see her. Her name is Debbie and she belongs to my husband. She tells me often that she loves me in my jeans, T-shirts, sneakers, and baseball caps. She loves my freckles, curls, laugh, and is never irritated by my honesty. She secretly laughs at my horrible humor and shakes her head at my wandering mind. She often talks about me as if I am not there, but then turns and smiles in my direction and says, "That's my Lindsey." I am sure I could do anything horrible or good and she would smile and repeat "That's my Lindsey."

I would love to tell you that this woman was the mother I always dreamed of having. The one that loved me for being different and never placed a blame on my shoulders that I could not brush off. I would love to tell myself this, to tell her this, but I can't. It isn't true. I wanted one of my own. I wanted the one I had. I wanted Mommy Number One to love me, teach me, show me, mold me, but she couldn't and can't still. I wonder if I had had a mother of my own if I would wear makeup, fix my hair, wear skirts and dresses, match my clothes better, tell false truths to save feelings, have girlfriends, and ultimately be a better girl.

I don't know what I would have been, but I do know what I am. I am my dad. I see me in his stubbornness and his easy truths. Some nights my dad echoes apologies over Oreos and milk and when his forehead wrinkles towards the center, and his eyes shine, I see that he suffers for these mothers. On these Oreo nights he does not need to speak because we share without words and endure our own thoughts. I start our silent dance by sliding an Oreo towards his fingers as he turns his gaze out a window that is not there.

"Hey...Dad. What do you think about all the new types of Oreos they have come out with? I want to try the mint ones, but I don't want to buy a whole bag because I know I am not gonna like 'em. What one would you try? Dad? Hello?"

"Well, Lindsey, at least I have given you something to write about." His eyes wrinkled in my direction as he slid the paper napkin with the tower of Oreos towards his milk. "I think I would like the white chocolate covered Oreos. Easy on the milk twerp! You're allergic to it. You would think you would learn not to drink it. Seeing how you are doubled over in pain an hour later."

I shrugged towards the ceiling and allowed half of my mouth to mimic my wrinkled eyes: "It's worth it."

For My Father

Jessica Martinez

That morning
My sister dressed our mother.
She chose cream and taupe-
Carried the clothes
To the funeral home
Alone
I was told-
(I could not do it.)
Instead, I wondered
If they really
Cut the clothes
Up the back.
I imagined them
Washing our mother's body.
She'd have hated it-
She was so private-
So private that
We would let
Nine Months
Pass before we cleaned
Out her dresser, her drawers,
Her closet.
So private
That she folded each one of us
Into the five cubby holes
Of her heart-
Separately,
Inside her-
There was no room
For my father.

The Death of the Piano

Ditrie Sanchez

No. 1

tap.
i pull the lever
tap.
and then i wonder
tap.
what that blue stain
tap.
came from on her shoe
tap.
it might be some
tap.
long forgotten gumball
tap.
she stepped in
tap.
without even realizing
tap.
and now she has to
tap.
get the gooey thing
tap.
all over me
tap.
and why
tap.
does she
tap.
always
tap.
get so
tap.
excited
tap.
when all i need
tap.
is a bit more
tap.
space between measures
tap.

my favorite part of being
tap.
the stretching of time
tap.
that comes at the end.
there-
she's done.

No. 2

settled moments
in between beatings
i watch as the others are struck
with cruel hammers
from underneath-
right in the belly
and they don't shout
but quaver and rejoice
they are tortured
in harmony
C!
i can sing with them
C!
my abuser is wrathful
C!
the tide will pass
c!
the pounding is not too hard
C!!
the thrashing is blinding
c.
"It is finished."

No.3

i sit in a dusty hall
where a century wrongs me
by leaving me desolate.

the halls once throbbed
with the mechanics of my substance.

i was music once.
at the time i didn't appreciate
the pounding of ignorant children-
the futile tinkering of adults with wooden ears.

now i would pluck out all my strings
to suffer the inconvenience of inexperienced hands.

but gone are the days where knowing fingertips
brushed my keys as to lover's lips
pulling the delicate sounds
that intoxicate the puritanical soul.

here is the reprimand
for the haughtiness of my youth:
that i should be a piece of furniture
sitting idly by while around me
the music taunts-
as a painting calls to the eyes of the blind...

unwanted-
i wait in my corner,
ever a silent penitent
until the Judgement Day.

Horton

Matthew Adams

Old Horton stays in the double wide,
watching sports with the smoke he hides.
Sometimes he comes out for a golf cart ride,
down to old Chechessee for the coming tide.

Old Horton looks up into the sky,
sees in heaven Crazy Mary and so he sighs.
Horton wants nothin' more when he dies,
just huntin' and fishin' without suits and ties.

Old Horton then was touched by an itch.
Thought of the things he could do being a crazy wretch.
So he grabbed his whisky and his boat he unhitched,
and took the truck to Charleston just before lunch.

Old Horton took to the city in all his splendor.
Blue jeans, boots, camouflage shirt, and orange
suspenders.
Mosied to the Market, ate at Henry's
looked for a girl for his pocket, and kicked for dreaming.

Old Horton made his way to Charleston Place,
looked for a room but would not pay the price.
Lady told him, snubbed him, laughed in his face.
She wasn't southern, her attitude a disgrace.

Horton, touched and feeling blue,
took his money and watched a man shine his shoe.
Without a lot of money the metro is not for you,
just another place where a man can lose.

Old Horton jumped in the truck and drove home,
4-cylinder GMC for a man with a frown.
No-more now does Horton city roam,
sits watchin' TV, smokin' in his doublewide home.

Old Horton a man grumpier n' hell.
Pop up chair, Lazyboy made of felt.
The laughing box, images of manipulative spells.
Still lowcountry cooking keeping his sense of smell.

Operation "Let's Ride"

Christi Healan

I turned my key and opened the door and there he was sitting in the recliner smoking a cigarette, the usual annoying clamor of the television absent. I immediately noticed his fatigues and boots making up the mound in the middle of the floor. "What are those doing out here?" I asked. "I was wearing them earlier." "For what?" I asked, surprised. "I went for a walk. Is that *okay.*" It was August and he had been out of the Army for 3 months, so I thought it a bit strange. "So how long were you out walking?" "About an hour... I think there was an Iraqi following me."

I met Micah last February right around the time my divorce was final. He was everything my ex-husband was not. He was tall. This was important because I had just spent the last six years kissing a man that was nearly two inches shorter than me. I had grown quite accustomed to wearing flat shoes. Micah was a towering 6'4 and huge; I can hide my own large frame behind his vast back and shoulders. He had read nearly as many books as I have, which meant intellectual and stimulating conversations, opposed to the countless times I had to explain the meaning behind *Adaptations*, or what lethargic meant, or how to spell e-c-o-n-o-m-y, for example. He was awesomely free-spirited, and when asked what he felt like doing he simply replied: "Whatever you want, I'm down to ride."

Micah thought I was funny, and I thought he had great teeth. He encompassed everything that was inherently male that I had felt deprived of during my previous relationships. He was strong and strong-minded, not afraid to stand up to me or to anyone else for that matter, and within that realm I felt completely safe. He was a soldier. He was an Army of One. He had spent seven months in Iraq during the beginning of the War in a Bradley tank, he had swam in the Euphrates River, he had played soccer with little Iraqi boys before Iraq's soccer team made it to the Olympics. He also survived a six-hour mission that turned into a two-day ambush, remained at the front lines of a combat zone for six months, witnessed burning and decaying bodies in the streets accompanied by the smell of urine, feces, and decaying flesh. Dark things and dark secrets behind those lovely brown eyes and behind the lovely white smile were about to boil over the surface and spew out of the kettle onto the stove and down the side of the oven to dribble on the floor. If only someone had been watching the pot.

He moved in with me in May, after he got out. The next two months were spent adapting to each other's cleanliness, or his lack thereof, his search for a job, and

several trips to the emergency room for his sharp chest pains and unexplained stomach cramps. By August he had been through three jobs, the longest lasting just a month. One night in July stands out in my memory... it was dark in the bedroom; I was pulled from sleep by his right hand clasped tightly around my wrist and his left around my right ankle. He was tugging on me. I tried to writhe my limbs free from his grip but he held on tighter. "A female officer is on the way to process you. We can't deal with female prisoners." His voice sounded dull and forced. I shouted his name, "MICAH! Wake up!" He tugged on my arm and yelled "Stay where you are!" I pulled myself free, shouting at him and shaking his shoulder to wake him up. He rolled over and hissed at me: "I'M TRYING TO SLEEP!!!"

By mid August I was starting a new semester at college and desperately awaited the arrival of my financial aid check. Micah hadn't held a steady job since he moved in and all the weight of paying the bills and making sure we had food rested on my shoulders. I was broke, swimming in new debt and starting to feel helpless and frustrated. Opening my credit card statements was a thing I abhorred, and I constantly berated him for leaving on the occasional light or spending too long in the shower: "You're wasting water! You are costing me money I don't have!" "Why don't you get a damn job and buy your own fucking cigarettes!" It took everything and then some that I made at my restaurant job to get by, but I was determined to go to school and just work when I could. I didn't quit school when my ex-husband told me he'd gotten another woman pregnant. I didn't quit school when I finally left the marriage nearly two years after that and my Dad had a quadruple bypass three weeks later. I thought I could work full time and still make it at college. I was unprepared for the challenge.

In late August, Micah finally went to the V.A. clinic in search of reasons for his chest and stomach pain not to mention the increasing inches around his middle. He was given Clonopin and Prozac for his anxiety and was told that panic attacks were the reason for his unexplained pain and sudden racing heartbeat. It was an unfortunate misdiagnosis.

I don't know how it escalated to that point. The events of that September day leading up to that hour were lost in the adrenaline running in my blood, the angry stabs of my tongue, and the sudden overwhelming, fearful realization that what he was doing wasn't on purpose. We had been arguing. Shouting. Hurling accusations and obscenities of the kind that over the last few months had gotten worse and worse. I left the room to retreat to my angry tears. I decided I needed a cigarette. When I came back into the living room, he was sitting on the floor in his underwear in front of the coffee table with all his pills scattered about on the table, the empty bottles thrown to the side. He was shoveling them in his mouth. "WHAT

ARE YOU DOING!" I shouted. I completely ignored his muffled answer. I lunged for the pills, grabbing a handful and spilling the rest on the floor. He immediately tried to wrestle them from my hand, trying to pry my vulnerable thumb from my fingers while I shouted at him to STOP! STOP! STOP! His impact pushed me to my back on the floor and for a moment I watched his sorrowful and defiant eyes looking down desperately at my hands, his mind figuring the best strategy to defeat my fists and take the pills from me. He stopped and stingily grabbed at the pills on the floor and got up and ran down the hall to the guest bathroom, locking the door behind him.

When the paramedics and police arrived, he sat defiantly tearful on the couch, his arms folded across his chest. I was chain smoking, trying to calm my shaking hands and forced breathing. The five officers surrounded him in the living room, asking him to go easily. When they saw the big angry giant of a man refusing to let the paramedics in the house, they predicted an altercation, followed by an arrest. "You guys don't scare me! I'm a combat veteran! I'm certified in hand-to-hand combat! I can take all of you! You better respect me! Don't you know I've killed people?!" "Micah", I said, "You are going either way. If you resist this you'll just go to jail after they take you to the hospital"

He was taken to a private mental health hospital in Brunswick. He was there for two weeks. I made the hour-long drive ten of those fourteen days to see him. The first time I saw him in his room, he was sitting up Indian-style by the head of his bed, intensely fragile, with tears that sprung from his eyes when he saw me walk in. The strong, confident man I had fell in love with had been replaced by a shell of his former self. It was still Micah on the outside, but he was a stranger. I had never met this Micah. I was afraid, and I hurt for him. I knew then that he wasn't lying around the house unmotivated to find work, or isolating himself from everyone and picking fights with me, accusing me of cheating or flying off the handle over the smallest detail just to be an asshole. It was Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and it had taken over his mind and his body. The Clonopin and Prozac given to him by the V.A. made him manic. He was fragile, damaged, and needed me more than ever. I was no longer angry. I no longer felt taken advantage of. I wrapped my arms around him and he nuzzled his face in the curve of my neck. We rocked back and forth on his bed, his tears burning hot on my skin, my lips whispering promises in his ear.

He was prescribed a cocktail of five different psychotic drugs... one for this, one for that. He was a zombie. He finally found a job working part time. He was supposed to follow up with a different V.A. doctor. I dropped two of the four classes I was taking because I overspent my sick days driving to Brunswick trying to make the visiting hours. I went to the library and checked out every book I

could find about PTSD, gorging myself with the stories and treatments of other veterans who had endured the illness and how they coped. There was nothing written about how their families coped. I spent a lot of time watching him, asking if he was okay, and worrying if he was going to be like this for the rest of his life, and if I could deal with that.

On a Friday night in late September I got a call at work. "I love you," his sad voice told me. "Hey, what's up? I'm kind of busy." " I just wanted to tell you that I loved you." Immediately, I felt my stomach threaten to jump out of my mouth, felt the butterflies screaming vengefully. "What's going on Micah?" and there was only silence. "I'm coming home!" I told him. "No! Don't come here!" he said with authority. I hung up the phone, searching frantically for my boss. I told her I had to go right away and I was sorry on my way out of the door. I drove the ten minutes home, threw open the door and found him once again in the living room, crying, his opened bottles on the island and his pills out in front of him on the table. I hurried towards him, and then I saw the knife in his hands. "Micah, what are you doing?" I said in a tender fury. "Christi, I can't take this. I just want to stop it all." I knelt down in front of him and in a soft voice I made my plea: " Honey, if the meds aren't working, then we'll go back to the doctor and tell him. You'll go to some counseling, you can join a support group.... you are going to get through this, it will just take some time, that book said it could take *months*...I love you... *Please!* I'm going to marry you and you are going to father my children..." It was another night spent in the emergency room, followed by Micah spending three days at another mental health facility where I could only see him thirty minutes a day in a supervised visit.

By the end of October I was growing impatient. I was struggling in my two classes, struggling at work, worried about leaving him alone, and if he would find the pills that I had taken great pains to hide from him. I didn't have any money. I went through my school money within a month and a half. We couldn't go out, have dinner, rent a movie... nothing extra. We were confined to the house. At least his boss was gracious enough to understand that he was having difficulties, and they seemed very proud and somewhat self-righteous about the fact that they were supporting someone who had served their country. No, really...I'm thankful they held his job for him, although the meager paycheck he brought home barely covered gas and cigarette money, and his hours were being cut. He wasn't taking his meds the way he was supposed to, he was still confrontational and edgy, slurring his speech at times and non-respondent at others. The worst came when he began to use the illness as a crutch and used it to get out of responsibility or to get his way: he couldn't get up for work because his medication made him too drowsy in the morning, or he couldn't drive anywhere because of his medication. I began to think he didn't want to get better.

"The neighbors are laughing at me," he said angrily one night in late October. "No, they aren't. What are you talking about?" We had argued all day over little minute insignificant things, just to argue, because it became easy to argue with him and keep my defenses up. "They are laughing at me just like you are. They think I'm crazy." I smirked back at him, "Well, what are you gonna do about it?" He got up out of the chair, his eyes distant, and walked toward the front door pausing to tell me over his shoulder as he walked outside: "I'm going over there to kill them." He made it to their bottom step before I reached the gate of our fenced-in yard, yelling at him to get his ass back in the house or I was going to call the police.

I learned to recognize Micah's episodes by his sudden erratic behavior, his jumpiness, the flitting back and forth of his eyes. A sudden noise, a car horn, someone yelling out unexpectantly made him suck in a short breath and gasp in fear. The flashing headlights of an oncoming car or a flashlight made him have a flashback of the cars in Iraq flashing their lights in signal of an ambush. The sound of Frenchie, my Siamese cat, jumping from the counter to the floor drew him from slumber and sent him in search of "enemies" throughout the house. Commando-style, he armed himself with a knife because I took the shotgun I inherited from my ex to my dad's house and away from his searching hands. He would peek around the corners of doors, bending low and stabbing at the air of a darkened room before he entered. When we were out in public he thought people were talking about him, laughing at him. He accused me of seeing my ex-husband behind his back... fat chance. I learned to adapt to his mood swings and tiptoe around him while at the same time I became more aggressive. I had to.

"I think I need to go to the V.A. clinic tomorrow and talk to someone. I'm not getting better. The meds aren't working." I supported that completely and I met him there after I got out of class the next day. I arrived in time to see him sitting in a small gray chair at the end of the hall by the side exit. As I approached, he looked up and found my eyes, his own streaming hot defeat down his face. "They're sending me to Charleston," he told me with trepidation. The V.A. Hospital was in Charleston, and they were sending him on the two-hour ride in an ambulance. They were leaving in ten minutes. He had nothing to take with him, no change of underwear, no toothbrush, and no extra socks... nothing. No notice. I waved at him from the parking lot as I watched his shell ride away.

He was in the mental health wing on the third floor for two weeks. His meds were switched around and around again. I went to see him four times. I drove the two hours, having lost myself sixty miles too far north the first time, to visit with him for one hour and then driving the two hours back to my empty house, back to Frenchie and my two dogs, back to sit on my couch and look at the

lonely recliner where Micah always sat. I hoped that this was the last time.

By early November, Micah had been back from Charleston for two weeks. He never went back to his job. He was embarrassed at having taken so much time off because of the illness and couldn't face his boss. But he started to smile. He started looking for another job. He started talking about going to school. I was growing hopeful despite my gut. The two weeks were short lived.

On a Thursday night in mid November we argued heatedly about this and that and everything, and with every verbal lashing we tossed at one another the situation escalated. I knew it was growing out of control, but I was overcome with fury and rage. He took the bottle of pills and ripped open the cap and threw 5 pills in his mouth. "Do you want me to keep going? I'll do it!" "GO AHEAD!" I screamed at him. He took two more. "Aren't you going to call 911? Go ahead and call em," he hissed. He went to the kitchen and pulled a knife from the drawer and brandished it in the air, "I'll fucking slice my wrist!" I screamed at him: "Well when I see some fucking blood spewing, maybe then I'll call 911!! Go ahead and just do it already!"

I had supported Micah for six months, since he moved in with me. I took care of everything. I was the one working my ass off so we had lights to turn on, hot water to bathe in, food to eat, a phone to reach out and touch someone, gas for both cars to get around in. I was about to fail both the classes that I missed at least once a week because I was too tired to get my ass out of bed and go, much less keep up with the assignments. I did most all of the laundry, the cooking, all the shopping, the vacuuming, the mopping, I cleaned up his vomit when his stomach rejected his medication... and I was tired.

"Call your uncle and tell him to buy you a bus ticket, I want you out of here," I didn't need the hassle. I had already proved to myself that I could make it on my own, no matter how drastically tight the times were. It would be easier if the only person I had to support was myself, "You don't care about getting better, you wanna use this illness as an excuse to sit around and let someone else take care of you and I wont do it anymore. You will NOT talk to me like I'm a fucking dog or say FUCK YOU to me after everything I've done for you. This is my fucking house, and everything in it is mine and I deserve better than this bullshit!!!" He pled with me for another chance and made the usual promises that he would change, but I knew that if I gave in, if I backed down, then he would know he could do or say whatever he wanted. I drove him to the bus station the next morning at five thirty, fighting with myself the whole way.

It must have been obvious from my red- rimmed eyes and tear-stained face, to the strangely intimidating onlookers at the bus station, that we had been fighting. They stared at us from the time we walked through the

doors to the ticket counter, and feeling their eyes on us, back outside. We came upon a homeless man just outside the entrance who rebutted us until Micah gave him all of his change on the way back to my truck. There he was with nothing but the clothes on his back and what he could stuff into his duffle bag, giving the homeless man every cent he had left to his name. We said goodbye in the parking lot; me in the warm truck with the window rolled down and Micah outside the door telling me he understood why I was making him leave, and that it was okay.

It was a glorious weekend of peace. He called me Sunday afternoon to tell me he was coming back the next day: "I'm coming home tomorrow." "No, your not," I told him. I needed more time to be alone, to cope and come to terms with what it was that I wanted, and I still didn't know what that was. "Uncle Terry says I have to leave, he already bought me a ticket back". He had nowhere to go. His uncle refused to deal with his episodic aggressive behavior, denying that Micah really had PTSD, and purposefully instigated confrontations with him. The rest of his family is in Washington, and told him he had to deal with his own problems and that they wouldn't finance his trip back home to them. They knew better than anyone that Micah still had some fight left in him, it was what they called "tough love."

So, I went to pick him up from the bus station, only three days after I left him there. It was seven in the morning, damn cold, and he was outside the front entrance smoking a cigarette, wearing a pair of jean shorts and a pullover fleece. He came back with everything he took with him except four major items: the pills for depression, the pills for anxiety, the pills for sleep, and the pills for mood (or psychotic behavior). Micah's predisposition for absent-mindedness served as an unexpected blessing in those moments in his uncle's house when he hastily packed his Army duffle bag to catch the bus back home. His uncle refused to send his medication to him because he wasn't going to pay for the shipping cost. After a few weeks of withdrawals, instead of fumbling about in a drug-induced haze, Micah began to walk, speak, and think with a clear head. His episodes all but ceased, only allowing for the occasional fitful sleep that brings images of a war he survived over a year ago now, images and memories I can never know.

He went out every day to look for a job, and found one within three weeks of being back. He received his first check just in time for the holidays. He likes his job and now looks forward to going to work and being able to give me money to keep us warm and fed. He'll be starting his own college career in a few months. There are no more angry fights and screaming. No more accusations or anxiety. No more pills. He came home to me a changed man, determined to defeat the thing that he had allowed to conquer him when a war couldn't. It took some patience,

but now he laughs every day. He greets me with a smile and dinner ready after a long night at work. He regained the confidence and ambition that radiated from him when we first met. This is the Micah I knew was inside the shell.

February brought with it the sudden passing of a year since Micah stumbled into my life across a dim and smoky dance floor. Our anniversary was on a Sunday. The Friday night before, I was working when he came to see me an hour before I got off. He came in the front door with a large vase of roses, carnations, gladiolas, daisies and a smile. He greeted my smile by telling me that was only the beginning. He told me he had talked with his family in Washington and that they were sending us an anniversary gift by UPS and to make sure I was going to be home between 2-3 while he was at work the next day. I slept until one and then pulled myself out of bed to shower and get ready for another long night at work. At 3:17 I heard a knock at the door. I peeked out of the diamond-shaped window to see a woman waiting with another vase of flowers for me. I thought ' Aww, they sent us flowers... that's nice." I thanked the woman, closed the door and pulled open the card. It said: "Surprise! I love you, Micah." So I went to work with a smile plastered to my face. Around 5:00 I was waiting for business to pick up, lounging against a counter sipping on Mr. Pibb when the Host called my name. The same woman from earlier was there with another huge vase of flowers... I was stupefied. The card said: "The next year will be sweet. Let's ride." On Sunday he blindfolded me and drove me downtown to a cozy little restaurant that I'd wanted to go to for years and never got around to it, the whole time asking me "Are you peeking?" and "Do you know where you are?" I smiled so much that day that my cheeks hurt and my teeth and gums grew dry.

The experiences of war didn't take Micah's body, but it ravaged his mind after the sand was washed away. He became the kind of casualty that they don't report on the news, a silent casualty of PTSD. He explored the depths of his own sorrow and knew regret unlike any most people experience. I can never know what it is like to survive seven months of fighting in a hostile desert, what it is like to be constantly on guard, to know I must kill or be killed, to see bodies lying in the streets of a city, or what it's like to live with the kind of remorse that comes with taking another life. But I know what living with the aftermath is like. It was a lesson resisted, hard learned, and rewarded. I know that whatever future lessons are in store for us, I'm down to ride. I was watching *Seabiscuit* the other night on HBO, and I couldn't stop myself from crying at something the owner of Seabiscuit said to the horse's trainer about their jockey who was blind in one eye: "You don't throw a body away just because he's banged up a little."

Visitor
Katherine Foote

I hear him, down the hallway, shutting the door,
water running.
I'm in my bed, listening.
Female Me
Uncontrollably acute
Patiently impatient.
My hair brushes my shoulders, my breath melts
quietly in waiting.
Down the hall, he's brushing his teeth, oblivious
to the girl in the dark.
Or maybe he does know
his power like
the moon's pull on the tides
and that the water flooding the marshes
swells and sifts—
the current runs strong
and drowns itself
then empties out into the ocean with one huge
sigh—

He spits out his toothpaste.
The water snaps off.

Ode to the Wells
Matthew Adams

From Marshland Road,
Right past the oak grove.
You can drive down a little way,
Through fields and cows and hay,
To Old Spanish Wells a different kind of state
People sippin' on tea eatin' sundried dates.

But down in the Wells
Time ain't the same.
People wastin' life
On hate and shame.
Always thinkin' of the past,
About the other man's whiplash.
Never trying to forget
Or let the present represent.

From Grandmama's cookin'
To a rainy days lighting.
To the marsh and the seas,
And the weeping willows leaves.
Children are grown with their minds open.
Time will kill elders prejudice notions.
But people will come carpetbaggin,'
Destroying the swamps New York creating.
But nothing will change the smell of bacon,
Early mornin' grits and southern fried chicken.

Give 'em all time to decide,
If another man will change the tide.
Building all the city streets,
At their southern feets.
That'll bring all southern folk together.
Second southern age, brother for brother.

From a dusty kitchen window
With old bottles to show.
In a rusty clawed tub
Where the daisies are grown.
A boy so young,
Barefooted, oh jump the dunge.
Growin', learnin', beatin' away time.
Tryin' to make plans,

While trying to make a dime.

In a Carolina Wilderness,
Small towns and quietness.
Soon to be taken all away
By big city folk, who can't stand to live day to day
In the smog of their own concrete,
Fightin' traffic, the flies, the smoldering heat.

So a carpetbagger says:
"Let's bring the fam,
To South Carolina's beautiful land.
Rip up all the trees
kill the locals like fleas.
They'll take our big city cash,
While we ruin and turn their state to trash."

Concrete, feel the heat,
Can't walk with barefeet.

From a tall building window a man thinks back,
About runnin' through the woods following a deer track.
Wind in his face and his brother's a laughin.'
A time so still, while the machine is in motion.

Lunch Break

Autumn Flynn

Doug and Walter ate at dusty booth listening to the usual clanking dishes and tinny country music. Flakes of dried clay peeled off their work boots and dusted the floor underneath the table. It was Lorraine's every day at lunch and they always came back to the job site smelling like cigarettes and fry oil. Walter refused to think about returning to work as he clumsily massaged his searing back.

"Could you pass the salt?"

Lorraine's fries were always soggy and bland. They were irresistibly bad. Walter needed some salt to make them go down easier. Three and a half shakes did it every time.

"Doug. Pass the salt would you?"

Doug emerged from his dripping cheeseburger. He stared at Walter as he gnawed on a wad of burger.

"Why can't you get it?"

Walter blinked. The dented salt shaker touched Doug's juicy plate.

"Why? Because it's rude, that's why."

Doug gulped his mouthful. "How is it rude?"

Walter's hands fell on the sticky table. "Because I'd have to reach over your plate to get it."

"Oh, I wouldn't mind." Doug took another healthy bite of his burger.

Walter snagged the greasy baseball cap off his head and scratched his thinning hair. The smell of fish made his throat tighten. Lorraine was making a tuna melt. He conjured a chuckle.

"Come on now, man. Just pass me that salt."

Doug set the burger on his plate and scanned Walter. "What do you need salt for anyway?"

"Well, for the fries of course. Just toss it over here please." Walter's left knee shook up and down. Doug reached his hairy arm across the table and plucked a fry from Walter's plate. He shoved it into his mouth and chewed. Walter shook his head slowly.

"These fries don't need salt."

Walter sputtered. "What'd you do that for?"

Doug picked up his burger and shrugged. "If I can reach across the table for a fry, you can reach across the table for the salt."

Walter glanced at the salt shaker. The steam from his fries had departed minutes ago. The tips of his fingers tingled. He glanced at Doug smacking his lunch. Walter sat still.

"You know, my back is really killing me today." Doug wiped his stubbled chin with a napkin and a tomato seed clung to his sideburn. "Yeah? Maybe you should stretch it. Lean over here and get your own salt."

Viking Funeral

Bonnie Rae Terrell

Inspector Aberdine stretched a hand toward his coffee (for which he felt a desperate need), but found himself confronting the brutal reality that if he wanted a sip of the precious sanity-saving beverage, he would have to get up and pour himself another cup. He weighed the pros and cons, decided that he did not have the stamina to survive his current interview on the few sad little grounds floating about in the cold brown puddle of coffee residue that barely covered the bottom of his paper cup, and prepared to pour a fresh helping. He pushed his body up and was halfway to standing before he looked over at the coffee pot and realized it was empty. He sighed and deflated back into his creaking, squeaking wooden chair.

The Inspector glared disconsolately at the report and the pictures sitting in front of him on his desk. He switched his gaze to the small, slim, blonde woman sitting across from him in a chair that Inspector Aberdine felt certain must be a great deal more comfortable than his own. She smiled back at him in a benign, child-like way that disconcerted Aberdine into dropping his glare and simply looking disconsolate.

He heaved another deep sigh, shuffled the papers in an authoritative and officious manner (well, he saw no harm in at least *trying* to act like any of this made sense), settled his hands in a dignified position over his slightly rounded early-forties paunch, cleared his throat, and fixed the petit blonde with a look that clearly said, "Let's get down to business."

"Alright, Miss Warren, let's get down to business." Aberdine bent forward and tapped the report with his index finder in a very decisive manner. Miss Warren smiled kindly back at him and blinked her blue eyes. He cleared his throat. "Now, to be honest, I find it very difficult to believe what I've read here," he confessed in a tone meant to clearly demonstrate that he was not befuddled in the *least*, merely skeptical. "It says, ah, that you, um, drove to the top of the bridge with your recently deceased grandfather's body in the bed of your truck. You then released him on a tricycle going northbound into south-

bound traffic. After setting him on fire." The Inspector stopped, shooting the woman an expectant look. He waited for some sign of disbelief, of outrage, he waited for shouted indignation and denial.

Miss Warren Smiled broadly and nodded her head.

"Yes, yes that's right," she piped in a small, pleasant voice.

Had the desk not been supporting his weight, Aberdine would likely have slid straight out of his chair and disintegrated through the cracks of the floorboards. Instead, he glared again at the papers in front of him (mentally cursing them for not being in error) while sneaking several forlorn glances at the empty coffee-pot. Maybe it would be worth the effort to brew another after all.

"Would you like some more coffee, Inspector? I'll fix it for you," chimed Miss Warren. Aberdine snapped his head back up and forced himself to affect an air of casual not-addicted-to-caffeine unconcern.

"Oh, uh, only if you'd like some. Doesn't matter to me." He shrugged his shoulders and pretended to smile. Miss Warren smiled back with a sincerity that made him feel like a cheap fraud before moving easily out of her chair and over to the coffee-maker. She calmly emptied a leftover half-inch of tasteless brown liquid into the soil of Aberdine's one and only office plant and patted its droopy leaves sympathetically.

Since she was turned away, the Inspector permitted himself to blink hard and shake his head once. He wasn't sure if he did it because he felt so frustrated or because this happily deranged woman bewildered him so completely, but he was sure he had just given himself a headache by doing it.

"Why, Miss Warren?" Aberdine asked as she glided to the trash can and disposed of the old, soggy coffee grounds.

"Hm?" She looked at him quizzically. The expression on her face reminded Aberdine of a kitten he had once had to shoo from sleeping in the bathroom sink at his grandmother's house.

"Why," he repeated while opening the drawer in which he kept his can of ground coffee, "did you set fire to your dead grandfather-"

"And send him pedaling off into traffic?" she finished for him. The Inspector nodded. "Well," Miss Warren continued, taking the proffered can and making her way

back across the room, "it was what he wanted." She nonchalantly scooped the black grounds into the coffee-maker while Aberdine gaped.

"*What do you mean it's what he wanted?*"

She paid him no attention. Merely hummed a chirpy tune as she walked to her bag, removed a bottle of water, and poured it into the coffee-maker, which then proceeded to bubble and hiss cheerfully, filling the room with the familiar caffeine-laden aroma of freshly brewed java. It was ambrosia to Aberdine's senses, but business *had* to come first and he single-mindedly resumed his line of questioning.

"What kind of man *wants* to be burnt up and hurled into traffic after he's dead?"

Miss Warren had reclaimed the seat across from him. She met his skeptical eyes, the corners of her pink lips turned up slightly, then swept her hands through the air between them in an all-encompassing gesture.

"My grandpa," she said.

Oh sure, *that* explained everything!

Inspector Aberdine was not accustomed to being utterly perplexed for excessive periods of time, and it was beginning to wear on him. Frankly he found it painful. He said, "I'm afraid I still don't understand," with a definite edge to his voice. Miss Warren cocked her head, puzzled over his annoyance. She sat quietly for a moment, with her pale eyebrows furrowed in concentration.

"Well, Inspector... I suppose I shall just have to try and explain Grandpa to you." Aberdine snorted. Still, he settled himself as comfortably as was possibly into his creaky wooden chair and nodded to indicate he was ready to listen.

However, Miss Warren first took the time to leave her chair and head back over to the coffee-maker. She poured its dark, delightful brew into a paper cup from the stack Aberdine kept next to the pot. He watched her back and it struck him how much she resembled the large-eyed, delicate-featured porcelain dolls his grandmother used to collect (the profit he'd made from auctioning off the useless collectibles after the old woman's death padded his savings account nicely). The most noticeable difference being that instead of curls, Miss Warren's hair looked more like yellow dandelion fluff that someone had lightly puffed onto her head. She fell just short enough of doll-ish to make Aberdine find her, well, mildly attractive. He briefly studied

one picture of the post-mortem cyclist, taken long ago while he'd been among the living. The old Warren didn't have much in common with his granddaughter, but he had given her the bright eyes, the small face, and the slight build; all of which conjured in the mind an image of a curious finch. He had also passed down the sincerity in his smile, though not, fortunately, the bushy mustache that sprouted above it.

Miss Warren returned with a cup of steaming black coffee. She placed it on Aberdine's desk, dropped his empty cup into the trash can, then gracefully lowered herself into her seat.

"I thought you were having some too," the Inspector said while gratefully lifting the warm cup to his mouth.

"I changed my mind."

Aberdine peeked at her over the white paper rim. She was not quite smiling for once, but she still wore her customary sweet and guileless expression. He felt very foolish. But when he took that first blissful sip, he decided it didn't really matter. Ah, sweet caffeine...

"Now: Grandpa." Miss Warren began. "I guess I should start from what you already know and work back from there. Grandpa always said that he wanted a Viking funeral; you know, to be set off onto the water with his boat on fire and his body tied to the mast. That was his plan, actually."

The painful suspicion that none of this was going to turn out as logically as he wanted gripped Aberdine, forcing him to carefully set down his coffee cup. Miss Warren continued without taking notice.

"But Grandpa had to come up with something else after an oil tanker ran over his boat and shattered it to pieces."

"And just why was your grandfather sailing in shipping lanes very, very far from port?"

"Oh, it wasn't Grandpa. It was the six felons who stole his boat. They were going to run away to Cuba. Someone later told me that bits of them washed up on the shore there."

Oh no. One cup of coffee wasn't going to be enough.

"Anyway, that didn't phase Grandpa. He just changed his plans a bit and started all over again. He didn't want to take anything from my inheritance, so he couldn't afford to buy a new boat. Did I mention Grandpa had a really fantastic sense of humor? Well, fantastic

might not be the word. He was British, so he had a British sense of humor. But I always thought he was funny."

Oh ho! *This* Aberdine could grasp. The mention of British humor instantly accounted for quite a lot. He sipped his coffee.

"Grandpa decided he would go on a tricycle. A purple one with yellow flames painted on it and white wheels. He specially designed it and ordered the parts made for his size and assembled it all on his own. It gave him something to do for the last three years of his life. He was one-hundred-and-four years old, you know."

"Yes, that was in the paperwork. Excuse me if this is a silly question, but... why a tricycle?"

Miss Warren tilted her head as if she couldn't believe Aberdine didn't see the logic. "Why, because it has three wheels and won't tip over, of course," she informed him.

"Oh... yes, I see. Smart man."

"Mm-hm," she nodded her head, smiling fondly. "Grandpa told me all about it and how he wanted to be sent off on the bridge and everything. We even had a few practice runs in the driveway before he died, but we used toothpicks instead of matches and no kerosene."

Aberdine's (by now overextended) credulity was snapping and popping and doing cartwheels across his brain. Practice runs? *Practice runs?!* Who practices for their funeral? Well, granted, if it involves traffic and combustible chemicals, maybe some practice would be advisable. Oh no. Why was he trying to put a logical spin on this crazy old man and his lunatic descendent? He needed to get back in touch with reality. He needed to force *her* into contact with reality.

"Wait, wait!" Aberdine exclaimed, thrusting his left hand forward with the same desperate motion one might see an amateur baseball player use in a vain attempt to block the concussing momentum of an unexpected ball split seconds before it impacts his cranium. Miss Warren obligingly fell silent. The Inspector deposited his reeling head into his hands, which in turn shared the weight with his elbows, which were splayed on either side of the coffee cup into which Aberdine stared intently. He breathed in and out slowly, rippling his own brownish-black reflection and looking somewhat like a recovering crack addict. He squinted his eyes shut, took one last breath, then straightened up to face the woman whose brains, the Inspector felt

sure, were fluffier than her hair.

"Did it... never occur to you," Aberdine tried calmly to ask, "I mean, did you never find any of it *odd*? Your grandfather's last wish? That he actually expected you to carry it out? Practicing for his own death? It's- it's inconceivable! People don't do things like that. Why did you go along with him? You should have had the old man committed!"

For the first time since he had walked in, Miss Warren ceased to look cheerful. Her gaze melted, like her smile, and flowed down to the hands she was twisting in her lap. She said nothing and the Inspector could see nothing except the top of her yellow head, lit by a beam of daylight from the window so that she resembled a small sun. At first, Aberdine thought he was imagining things, but no; he distinctively saw a fallen tear slide its way from her thumb down each finger, lingering in the crevices between and leaving glistening evidence behind that it had been there. He wasn't sure why she took his words so harshly, but that didn't stop him from feeling as if he had just smashed a butterfly. And it didn't stop him from wanting a torrent of cinder blocks to plummet through the ceiling and pound him into the foundation of the building as punishment for acting like a thoughtless ogre.

Feeling very, very *very* sheepish, the Inspector eased open a drawer. He lifted out a box of tissues for the soundlessly crying woman, then gingerly eased the drawer shut again.

Long seconds in which Miss Warren did not move, did not make a sound, only sat in a completely rigid, weeping silence that made Aberdine pray harder for a cinder block hailstorm.

At last, he could no longer stand the strain and cleared his throat while suggestively nudging the tissue-box toward her. Miss Warren looked at it in surprise, having genuinely not seen it there. The Inspector looked at her in surprise because he had never known anyone could cry without their face turning red and their nose swelling. He had not known it was possible for tears to be pretty.

He began stammering an apology while Miss Warren dabbed her smeared cheeks.

"Uh, I- I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. Or your grandfather's memory. I, um... Please forgive me?"

The eyes she turned on him were so big, so blue, and so full of hurt and hopeful trust – like crushed violets

indomitably trying to spring vertical again – Aberdine fancied for a moment that the world was consumed with blue and he was drowning in it.

Then she looked down at the papery white square in her hand and started to absentmindedly fold it corner to corner, allowing the Inspector's mind to surface in his uncomfortable chair in his grey office with its pitiful and mostly brown little plant.

"Grandpa wasn't crazy," she murmured.

"No, no, of course he wasn't," Aberdine hurriedly agreed. He shifted about in his seat, crossed his legs, tried crossing them the other way, uncrossed them entirely, and reached over to put the box of tissues away for lack of anything better to do and because Miss Warren seemed to be finished with them. He finally screwed himself up to admitting, "I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry I was so inconsiderate."

"Grandpa was a wonderful man," she said after a moment. "I loved him so much."

"I'm sure you did."

"He wasn't crazy. He was just funny. He wasn't afraid of anything. He liked to make things. He liked to go places. He liked people. He was always so kind," she recounted to the white napkin she had folded into a tiny triangle.

Aberdine waited, but she didn't say any more – just sat and stared at the tissue. Desperate to loosen the tension that was crushing his gut like a sumo-wrestler, the Inspector grabbed his cup and moved to the coffee-maker. He needed a fresh, hot mouthful, definitely. Never mind that his cup was still one-quarter full. He needed something that hadn't been cooling and untouched for the last five minutes. He needed the pure, scalding caffeine goodness of a fresh cup of coffee.

What to do with the amount he had left?

Aberdine considered leaving it and just filling up a new cup, but then he noticed his solitary droopy-looking plant, and decided to follow Miss Warren's lead. He dumped his leftover joe into the plant's soil and picked up the coffee pot. He turned to the woman after he had finished pouring to ask if she was sure she didn't want any. He found her looking from him to the plant with an unreadable expression on her face.

"Um..." it rather unnerved him, "would you, ah, like a cup of coffee?" When she caught his eye, he thought, for

a moment, that she had the electric and excited air of someone who has just discovered something that delights them to no end. But he blinked and when he looked again, she was only smiling slightly.

"Do you have any sugar and cream?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, no cream. Only sugar."

"Well, I suppose just sugar is good enough." The way she tilted her head and wore that smile made her look as if sadness had never crossed her path and tears had never crossed her face. It made Aberdine wonder if he was the crazy one and had just dreamed the last few minutes.

Perplexed, but trying his damnedest not to show it, the Inspector poured another cup and sat it in front of her. He returned to his chair and opened the same drawer in which he kept his ground coffee and produced a box containing dozens of little sugar packets. He slid it across his desk along with a plastic stirrer that was fortuitously hiding behind the coffee can. Being primarily a drinker of unadulterated black coffee himself, he watched in disbelief as the young woman emptied packet after packet into her cup and stirred. Finally, she achieved her ideal sweetness and took a sip. Aberdine followed suit and mentally reveled in the charming bitterness that sizzled and burned down his throat.

"Grandpa drank his coffee black too," Miss Warren's voice came breezing over him unexpectedly. The Inspector raised his eyebrows at her in an "oh really, how interesting, do continue" manner, thought it actually unsettled him slightly to find her scrutinizing his coffee or himself so closely. She took another small, contemplative sip before continuing.

"He was used to tea, since he came from England, but he learned to love coffee."

"Ah, yes, you mentioned something about your grandfather being British. One of those classic immigrant stories where he strikes off to seek his fortune in America? Did he jostle about with a thousand other travelers on the deck of a ship so he could catch a glimpse of Lady Liberty?" Aberdine asked, joking somewhat.

"No," Miss Warren informed him. "He didn't mean to come here at all. It was a bit of an accident really."

Aberdine was intrigued. "How does anyone accidentally immigrate to another country?"

"Well, a friend of his got married and Grandpa drank a lot at the party. He fell asleep and woke up in

Miami." The Inspector had to set his coffee down and put a hand over his mouth to keep from snickering. "He didn't see the Statue of Liberty until years later. In fact, it was four months before he realized he was in America at all. He thought he'd gotten off in Mexico. Since he didn't understand a word of Spanish, nobody told him otherwise until he walked several blocks north and met a lot of English-speaking gringos."

To hear *her* use the word "gringo" was it for Aberdine: he *had* to laugh. A guffaw leapt from his mouth. He sat in his chair and shook with laughter. "Are you sure," he calmed himself," are you sure your grandfather wasn't just pulling your leg?"

Miss Warren looked at him, wide-eyed. "That's how he always told it." But a tiny grin snuck onto her lips and she confessed that Grandpa liked to tell stories and he may have embellished a little to make her laugh.

"Well, I take it your grandpa made it out of Miami?" Aberdine continued.

"Oh yes. It wasn't that he didn't like Miami, he just didn't have a head for languages and never could pick up on Spanish. So, he took a bus north."

"Ah, really? What did he do? I mean, how did he support himself?"

"Oh, Grandpa did all kinds of things! He did whatever people needed him to do. Then he met Grandma. She hired him to fix her fence. Then she needed him to fix a squeaky stair. And then a window needed replacing. Grandpa told me he finally realized she wanted him for a husband the day she walked into the kitchen and asked him if he liked her in pink with white dots."

Aberdine creased his eyebrows. "What was so special about that?"

"Her underwear was pink with white dots."

"Oh... OH!" It dawned on the Inspector, and he found himself blushing like a fool while Miss Warren giggled. Internally, he began comparing her rendition of her grandmother's exploits to his own granny's depressingly tame existence. Her life as he knew it had consisted of cats and dolls, plastic over the furniture and, eventually, Alzheimer's. Old Mrs. Warren sounded like a grandmother he could have liked.

"But the problem," Young Miss Warren went on, "was that Grandma was already married. She and Grandpa didn't know what to do about her husband. But things

turned out ok after she caught him in the shower with a local teacher. She got half his money in the divorce, and the car. Grandpa told me once that he thought she had blackmailed the schoolteacher too. You know, female teachers weren't allowed to be married or anything in those days. Grandma never would tell him exactly how they wound up with an extra three-hundred dollars. Sometimes I think Grandma may have been... just a little crazy."

Aberdine snorted at the understatement. Unfortunately, he did it while sipping his coffee, the result being that he blew a stinging multitude of hot droplets out of the cup and onto his face. This triggered a coughing fit and a hurried attempt to remove the burning liquid with frenzied hand motions, making the Inspector look not unlike a frantic raccoon trying to pat out flames on the ends of his whiskers. After ascertaining that his eyeballs had not been scalded from their sockets, Aberdine had the presence of mind to wipe the remaining coffee from his face and mustache with one of his tissues. He tossed the sodden napkin into the trash can, along with his sodden pretense of dignity.

He laced his fingers together, place them (this time sans dignity) over his early-forties paunch, looked Miss Warren squarely in her blue eyes (which had gone quite wide), and leaned back comfortably in his uncomfortable chair.

"Well, I bet those two took that car and drove off into the sunset, eh?"

Her first response was a blink. Then a beaming smile. "No," she shook her head and laughed. "The other way. They went East, to Atlantic City. They both took jobs at a fancy hotel. Grandma had to quit when she found out she was pregnant with my father, but Grandpa got promoted – became the hotel manager eventually. He always said it was because they liked his accent. They paid him well and Grandma never had to work again. She took up skydiving."

Aberdine smiled. "Sounds like quite a woman." He had been flipping through the file on his desk until he found the picture he wanted. It was the same one he'd been looking at earlier, only this time he pointed to the woman next to the man with the bushy mustache and asked, "Is that her?" He slid it to the middle of the desk; he and Miss Warren leaned over the old snapshot together.

"Oh yes, that's my grandma!" And that's Grandpa.

Their hotel used to face the beach they're standing on," she gestured excitedly at each part of the photograph – from her grandmother who looked like Mae West, to her finch-like grandfather, to the wind-frothed surf behind them. "Oh look!" she cried in delight. "There's my daddy. Do you see him? Right there!" She pointed. Aberdine leaned closer and realized there *was* a small, dark-haired boy in the picture. Sort of. He was hiding behind his father's legs, which left only his face from the eyes up visible alongside one pale little hand clutching Old Warren's pants.

"Oh... Daddy," the young woman across from Aberdine murmured. She gently lifted the picture and leaned backing her chair with it. The Inspector watcher her, and suddenly wanted to cry. Her fingers and eyes touched the black and white image with such unimaginable tenderness, with such tangible *love*, he simply didn't know what to think. He felt sure he had never loved anyone that much. He wasn't sure he *could* love like that. How did she do it? Why did this pixie of a woman infuriate him, make him laugh, and make him want to cry? He hadn't cried at his own grandmother's funeral. He'd spent most of his adult life wearing a poker face, doing what it took to keep from annoying anybody and collect a decent paycheck. Now here this little blonde maniac had the insolence to push a dead old man down a bridge and completely unbalance Aberdine's stable, blank-faced life!

Miss Warren broke his mental tirade with a sigh and a wistful smile at the photograph. Suddenly, the Inspector couldn't remember precisely what he'd just been thinking and he wasn't sure what he had been getting angry about.

"I remember when Daddy died," she said quietly, continuing to lightly trace the picture with one white finger. "I was very little, but I remember. I don't know why I can't remember my mother. They both died on the same day."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

She turned her huge blue eyes on him and smiled serenely while reaching across the desk to return the picture. "What I do remember was happy," she said. "I went to live with Grandpa after that. He needed someone, really. Grandma had just died too."

"Oh, that's terrible!" Aberdine exclaimed. He felt genuinely sorry.

She nodded. "It was very hard on Grandpa at first.

She died skydiving and he thought something had gone wrong with her parachute, but they didn't find anything wrong with it. Then he didn't understand why she didn't pull the cord like she was supposed to. Her doctor told him later that she had cancer. She had it for years and didn't tell anyone. He said that by her last visit it had gotten very bad and she wasn't going to live long. When he found that out, Grandpa understood why she didn't pull the cord. He felt much better after that."

The Inspector sat in his chair and gaped. He felt as if a large iron spike had just skewered him in place. Something ominous throbbed far in the depths of his cerebellum and he knew he'd have to deal with one whopper of a headache later on. But for now, he just wanted fresh coffee. It was time for another cup. Without a doubt, time for another cup.

He heaved himself to a standing position and staggered toward the coffee pot, working out the stiffness in his legs as he went. He asked Miss Warren if she'd like another cup, but she declined. Aberdine stood in front of the window, next to his coffee and his plant. He gazed out, not thinking or feeling anything for the moment, simply drifting. Drifting in the late afternoon light that made the asphalt and concrete beautiful, that cast green trees in bronze, that lit up the face of the massive old clock tower. Which reminded Aberdine that normally he would have been home by now, and he had a job to finish. He refilled his cup and ambled back to his desk.

"So," he paused to taste the dark brew, "the only relative you had left, and he raised you." His eyes met hers, and suddenly the sun shone in his brain, lit with comprehension. If the Old Warren had wanted a tombstone it would have read, "Grandpa-father, mother, grandmother, friend. Here lies an entire family." Aberdine came to understand something about himself in that moment: his whole life had been cursed with an overabundance of family. He had forgotten their value. But if all you had was one person...

"I think I get it now," he spoke softly to Miss Warren. "I think I'm starting to see how you could love someone enough to do the last thing they ask of you. No matter how... unusual it is. You loved your grandfather that much, that's why you did it?"

She nodded. "Yes. What better reason could there be?"

Aberdine tilted his head in agreement. "Hey, I see where you're coming from. I'm not sure I see where Grandpa was coming from, but I understand why you had to do what you had to do. Still, I don't know precisely what the legalities on that are. The report is a little sketchy, exactly what did you do and how did you do it?"

"Oh, well, after Grandpa died, I had to use a lot of duct tape to keep his hands on the handlebars and his feet on the pedals. And he had designed the tricycle with a pole so I could make him stay upright."

"Oh my, the old man thought of everything, didn't he?"

"Usually, if a person lives to be one-hundred-and-four it's because they're good at thinking things out."

"Ah, yes, that makes a lot of sense."

"Mm-hm. Anyway, I drove to the top of the bridge and got him out of the truck. I poured the kerosene everywhere, like he had shown me, and gave him a little push to get him started. Then I struck a match and threw it and away he went!" Miss Warren beamed enthusiastically.

Aberdine sat in his wooden chair and pondered. Perversely, a medley of "Hunka Hunka Burnin' Love" and "Great Balls of Fire" began to play in his head.

"Didn't you worry that someone might bet hurt?" he asked after a short pause.

"Oh yes, I thought about that. That's why I put him in the bike lane. And he wasn't going very fast because the bridge isn't very steep. There's not much traffic that late at night either."

The Inspector nodded and pondered some more. He chuckled. "I bet it looked quite impressive to those few people who were on the road. It's not every night you approach a bridge to see a fiery man coming toward you on a tricycle. A purple tricycle. With yellow flames and white wheels."

"And a little red flag waving behind," she added, with an almost gleeful grin. Aberdine put his head in one hand and laughed out loud.

When he had calmed down and regained his composure, he closed the file on his desk and tossed the folder into a drawer. He leaned forward on his elbows, he fidgeted with his mustache briefly.

"Look, Miss Warren," he began, "I'm not sure how all this is going to turn out for you. The circumstances are so strange, it's hard to tell how many violations you've

committed or which laws you've broken –"

"It's alright," she stopped him. "Grandpa knew about all that. There's plenty of money to cover any legal bills. I'll be fine."

She and the Inspector met eyes across the desk.

"Yes. I'm sure you will be fine," Aberdine stated. He smiled.

They both stood up and he stretched, then made his way to the coffee-maker to unplug it.

"May I use your phone to call a taxi? They've taken my license away for right now."

"Mm? Oh, um... ah... I'll drop you off."

"Really? You don't have to do that, I don't want to keep you out late."

"No, it's fine. I should have been home 30 minutes ago. A little while longer won't matter. Besides, it's Friday. Hey, ah... whygostraighthomewouldyouliketostopfor... coffee?" Aberdine, with his hand on the near empty coffee pot, realized too late how stupid the suggestion was. But Miss Warren smiled brilliantly.

"Coffee would be great," she told him. They left together. Aberdine flipped the light switch on the way out the door, leaving his office, his coffee-maker, his creaky chair, and his plant shining in the sunset glow that streamed softly through the window.

I Can Smile

Melissa Redding

It was one of those days that I never thought would happen - couldn't believe would ever happen. It was one of those years that felt like it passed too quickly. Like when I thought summer vacation would never come because I couldn't wait for my dad to drive my friends and me to Summer Waves. We couldn't wait to pile into that old Ford Bronco with our towels that had a cool band on them, probably New Kids on the Block or Debbie Gibson. We would smell of sunscreen and sing at the top of our lungs along with the songs that were on the radio. My dad was so cool that he would sing right along with us and then pleasure us with a serenade of an oldie song that only he knew the words to. We would whine about how uncool the song was and then he would just sing louder. Those were the good old days that I just couldn't wait to come around again; however, they come around so much faster than you ever thought they would and are over even faster. This was not a happy time that I had waited for. This was more of a moment that I never thought I could survive.

My brother called me at my apartment, the morning of January 26, 2002, and woke me up. I was so independent in my new apartment and felt like the most adult teenager I knew. He said that I needed to come to the hospital because my dad kept asking where I was. "What's wrong? Is something going to happen?" I just knew everything would be fine. I just knew. I just knew. My dad had been diagnosed with cancer, Renal Cell Carcinoma, in March. It was kidney cancer, a cancer that not a lot is known about. The internet, books, doctors, specialists - no one knew anything about his disease. Hours of research never provided me with an explanation of what caused this type of cancer and even more hours of research never told me what the cure for it was. It didn't matter because we were going to make it through this. So I got dressed and called the place that I worked and told them that I would be about an hour late because I had to visit my dad in the hospital. The voice on the other end of the phone sounded sad and worried, like she expected something bad was happening. I was a little pissed off that someone would think so negatively. Didn't everyone know that everything would be all right? I would be just fine.

I arrived at the hospital and walked to his room on the fourth floor, which is the oncology floor. The word "oncology" just sounds odd. What a name? The room was dark and quiet and everyone looked so sad and worried. I couldn't understand why they looked that way because everything was going to be fine. Just fine. I sat down in a mauve chair, a hard chair that I thought should have been

more expensive and softer because people spend hours waiting for their loved ones to get better. They spend hours sitting in this chair crying and hoping that things will turn out right. They weren't as lucky as I was going to be. Some didn't get to see their loved ones survive cancer. I sat in that chair and my grandmother came and sat next to me and rubbed her fingers through my hair. She seemed so sad. I couldn't believe everyone was just giving up and throwing in the towel when there was so much hope. My dad was never sick. He was a fighter and could make it through anything. This man carried me around on his back, his shoulders, made me laugh and smile. I have his calves, both skinny and without any attractive shape. He was also one of the cutest dads on the block. Why didn't they think that he could beat something not visible? They had no clue how strong he was and how lucky we were to have someone so strong.

The television wasn't on and all I could hear was the sound of the heart monitor beeping. It was so annoying. I just wanted it to stop. I wanted everything to stop so the last year could start all over. The doctor would come in, check the monitor, and not even speak. The doctor's and nurses all maintained a professional demeanor so they wouldn't get attached to their patients or risk letting their guard down. They couldn't be compassionate with the patient's family. What is wrong with letting your guard down? What is wrong with letting someone know that you care?

He was restless. He kept asking, "Is Melissa here? Did she come?" And I would tell him that I was right there in the room. I tried not to cry because I didn't want him to think that I thought he had lost the battle, like everyone else thought. I knew better. His legs would just move back and forth, back and forth. He looked like a child throwing a temper tantrum, only without crying or selfish motive. It was like something was holding him down and he was trying to kick himself free, but he couldn't and he just kept trying and pushing. Trying and pushing. He looked so uncomfortable and he would just keep saying, "I want to go home. I want to go home." I knew he wanted to go home and I couldn't wait until they gave him some more blood to raise his hemoglobin level so we could take him home finally. Two weeks in a hospital is a long time. His legs just kept moving and he would kick the covers off of him because he was hot. I didn't understand how he could be so hot when he had gotten so skinny and hadn't eaten very much. This man's face and body had changed from a handsome forty-six year old man to an eighty year old man in just eight months. The pictures on the mirror in my bedroom taken just a short time earlier showed a man with a bright smile, a tan, full face from fishing in the sun, and salt-and-pepper hair that only he could make look striking. Now, in the hospital bed, there was a man with a sunken face, pale, and an almost bald head that was as soft as a

newborn baby's. I wasn't ready for this, but was sure he would bounce back just fine.

Sometimes I think a person can lose all sense of judgment or intelligence when their heart takes over their mind completely. It all makes sense to me now, but that day I must have been stuck in a dream where I wouldn't accept logic. That day I knew that all that mattered was that my dad was the greatest man I had ever known and that God wouldn't take away a young girl's daddy before he walked her down the aisle or became a granddad. Sometimes all sense of logic is lost upon a dream that is so embedded in your heart.

I remember sitting down in the den of my parent's house with my father. His frail body was sitting in the chair that would become practically his home for the next few months. Sometimes, I still expect to see him sitting in the faded blue recliner. The September 11th tragedy had just happened and he looked at the television and started crying. I had never seen my dad cry before. I thought he was crying because of all of the people who had lost their lives and would never get to see their loved ones again. I never thought that I might not ever see my loved one again. My dad looked at me with tears and said, "I am just so scared that I won't be here for your wedding day or to see my grandchildren."

"I know you will," I said only smiling and naïve because I was certain he wasn't going anywhere.

That day, January 26, 2002, he kept asking my grandmother why I was crying and if I was okay. My grandmother told him I wasn't upset and then she whispered in my ear that I should stop crying because he might think something is wrong. I tried to stop crying, but it was an uncontrollable emotion that I had never felt. I couldn't stop and I wasn't sure if it was because I was accepting the inevitable or because I was just so frustrated with everyone else seeming like they had given up on him. I don't know exactly what was happening, but I think my dad somehow knew. Some moments I felt like he would kind of go out of his mind, like the drugs Oxycontin, Vicodin, Morphine, had gone to his head and he didn't know what he was saying. Right when I thought he was a little crazy, he would reassure me by saying, "I'll be okay. I love you."

How does anyone stay so strong for others? How could he have possibly been thinking about my feelings and if I was upset when he was the person in the hospital bed hanging on to life? How could he have been worried if I would be okay when it physically hurt him to even speak? How could I have been so selfish to cry at the thought of my dad not being there to walk me down the aisle? What could we all have done to make this whole situation never happen? Pray harder? Go to church more? My dad wasn't a bad person - why did he deserve this? How does

anyone ever know the answers to these questions or is there any answer? I don't think there is an answer, only more room for questions.

My mom had been by my dad's side for two weeks straight in his hospital room. She didn't leave to take a shower. She never left him even when he wasn't the best husband in the past. That day, when he started feeling better, she left to go take a shower and said to call her if anything changed. My grandmother told me a few days earlier that the men in our family don't die when there are women in the room. I thought it was all crap, but not anymore. My mother left to take a shower which was the first time she had taken a full shower instead of a wipe down at the sink in two weeks. I was getting so upset and worked up that my grandmother told me to go to the computer room down the hall and go play on a computer. I always wanted to feel so independent and secure, but that day all that I wanted was to be comforted and held like I was when I was a child - when I was daddy's little girl. I went down to the computer room and started looking for scholarships. Something hopeful to tell my dad when he recovered because I knew that my mom and dad wouldn't be able to afford to pay for my college tuition. They would have so many bills to pay when my dad left the hospital. My grandmother walked in the computer room with my Aunt Debbie and we started talking about - the weather, the wall paper, what I was going to do with my degree, if I was still dating the same boy, was my car running smoothly - what I cannot remember, but for a few minutes the whole room was quiet.

My grandpa ran into the room and said, "He's gone! He's gone!"

That moment when someone runs up behind you and screams and your heart stops because you're scared - that is how I felt. It wasn't real. It couldn't be real. My heart never started beating again. There was no sign of emotion, not for a few months. The nurse wouldn't allow me to see him right away because the nurses want to make the patients presentable when that is the last thing on the family's mind. After a few minutes that seemed like a year, I was allowed in. I never thought I would touch a dead person. On television the bodies always look so dead, so cold, and inhuman. This was different. I didn't mind holding my dad's hand; somehow, all that I could say was "He looks so peaceful." I was selfish I guess. I didn't want my dad to die but I wasn't thinking of the pain he was suffering through just to be a stronger man for me. I was daddy's little girl and I was so proud to hold that title. I still am.

Seven years ago, I was only sixteen, I dated a guy who's mother died while we were dating. Afterwards he

just fell apart. He didn't go back to school, he started drinking, doing drugs, didn't care if he slept all day, or if he even brushed his hair. He was going to be in a band and play guitar. He was. He became a different person than who I first came to know. I felt like I had to get away from him then, or I would end up in the same rut right there with him. Seeing him go through the emotions of losing a parent, I just knew that if something that sad happened to me, I would handle it differently. I would not fall apart. No one ever thinks something so awful and unexpected would happen to them. Lending an ear to listen or a shoulder to cry on is different from being the person that needs it.

So I graduate in May. I only missed one week of college and then just bounced back. I never talked about the feelings I experienced because I always down played them. I would say, "There are worse things in life" or "Some people don't even know their dad." This is all true but I needed to own my feelings. I needed to know that it wasn't selfish for me to want to cry and feel bad. I needed to know that everything would be fine, eventually. I needed so much more than had been taken from me. Everything is so much easier now even though I won't have some of the things that other girls will. I do have memories of a man that loved me more than he ever loved anyone else and would have done anything for me just to see me smile or know that I was safe.

Just the other day I downloaded the song "You Are So Beautiful To Me" because my dad would sing that to me when we were driving anywhere in his old Ford Bronco. We would drive to the dump and empty a trailer full of leaves or drive to Woo's Hardware store for some little thing he would need to fix something big around the house. I can remember the loud engine and the hardness of the seats, how tall the truck was and how we would just tower over all of the other cars on the road. I remember his bright smile and his bubble nose that I am also proud to wear and the way he would motion his hands as if he was directing a choir. I remember looking at him while he would sing the words to me and I knew that I was Daddy's little girl, that it was my song. I knew that those moments were mine and his only, to remember forever. I listened to the song in my car yesterday and for the first time since he passed away, I didn't cry. I smiled.

Fear and Loathing in the Second Grade

Alicia Ferrell

The assassination of John F. Kennedy; The explosion of the Challenger spacecraft; September 11th; these are events that one can never forget. For me, it was the collapse of Pat Copeland. I was in the second grade and it was during our morning song time. Each morning we stood in a circle, there was about thirty of us, and we would sing your basic Sunday school songs. I usually used this time to inspect the dirt I had collected under my fingernails or chew my shoulder length hair (A nasty habit that annoyed my teachers), but this morning I felt particularly inspired and thought I would stand tall, pay attention and sing "Fishers of Men" with great gusto. My nemesis at the time was a short, chubby girl named Pat Copeland. And because I too was a short, chubby girl, I hated her. Right in the middle of the song, the part where we were "reeling in" all of the people for Jesus, Pat, who was standing directly across from me, collapsed on the floor. Mrs. Geraldine Chapman, our teacher, ran to Pat screaming to our principal and her husband Sheldon Chapman, "O Lord! Help me Sheldon! She's swallowing her tongue!" I was gripped with time-freezing fear.

Before this crisis, I had never witnessed anything remotely exciting. Except Jimmy. Jimmy was a mentally challenged adult who went to our church. The church we attended had unofficial "assigned" seats. The Spears family sat on the right side of the church on the third pew; the White's sat on the left side, fourth pew. This was mainly because Mrs. White liked to watch how badly the Spears children would act so she could brag about her superior mothering abilities to her family. Where you sat said a lot about how spiritual your family was; too far up and you were pious, too far back and you were in need of a home visit from the preacher. My family sat on the left side and the sixth and seventh pews, somewhere in the middle. We did not sit together because my father did not want to have to keep looking to his left to see what we were doing so he sat my brothers and me in front of him. It also made it easier for him to thump us on our ear if we misbehaved, and you could always count on at least one person being thumped every Sunday.

My father was very rigid in his seating habits, which explained why he would not move when Jimmy started coming to our church. I had never seen a crazy person before, but I had heard of them. On our way to church every Sunday, we would pass an old, two-story home that looked as if it had been built before the civil war. It was easy to see that it had once been beautiful, but it had been neglected for many years and was in need of repair. My father would tell us that there was a crazy woman that the family had kept locked in the attic for many years. He told us that when he was a boy she had escaped from the attic and chased him and his friends with a knife all over the yard. I do not know if this story was true or not, my father was an Irishman who loved to tell outrageous stories, but because of this image, I had a paralyzing fear of crazy people.

I was not sure if Jimmy was crazy, or challenged, so I kept as far away from him as I could, but because of our "assigned" seats, I sat directly across from him in church. Jimmy's behavior during church was a constant source of glee for my brothers, who liked to witness disturbing events. Jimmy would pick his nose — there was nothing unusual about that — but he never carried a tissue, nor did his mother. I often wondered why she never scolded him for such uncouth behavior, but now I am convinced she was drunk most of the time. She sat with her eyes half-closed, and a thin-lipped smile fixed to her face throughout the service. Her expression never changed. If the preacher condemned us all to an after life of fire and brimstone, Jimmy's mother never frowned. She sat perfectly still, apparently reveling in her drunken stupor. Who could blame her after observing Jimmy's antics? After capturing his trophy, Jimmy would inspect it and then attempt to flick it as if he were participating in the "Booger-Flicking Olympics." I would experience the same paralyzing fear in church as I did that day when Pat Copeland collapsed. I was afraid of becoming part of the story.

One Sunday, after a particularly difficult struggle between Jimmy and one of his prizes, my brother asked, "What is that on your shoulder?" Tim, the most evil of all brothers, pointed to a small glob on my shoulder; I stared at the offending mark and knew that I had been an unwilling participant in Jimmy's sick sport. I was forever linked to Jimmy. My brothers convinced me that I was destined to become Jimmy's wife. It was a way of being marked, sort of like Cupid's arrow. I realize now that it was too easy. My brother must have put *something* on my shoul-

der (I do not want to know what), but there is no way a booger flew across the aisle and landed on my shoulder.

Seeing someone swallow their tongue was a much bigger deal than watching Jimmy's gross antics. I tried to see into Pat's mouth, but I was at the feet end of her seizure. Was it possible to swallow your tongue? I was sure it was an exaggeration.

Even though I was frightened at what was happening, I became completely distracted by something that took place at the opposite end of Pat's mouth. For me, this is where the memory becomes so unforgettable. Geraldine, the aforementioned big-haired teacher, rushed to Pat's feet and screamed, "Sheldon, pull her legs up so she doesn't swallow her tongue!" The principal pulled Pat's pudgy, patent leather clad feet up and showed, to my horror, Pat's pink underwear. I was mortified to see her chubby thighs in the air, exposed for everyone to see. My face grew hot and I felt physically ill. I was sure that Pat knew the entire second grade class was examining her underwear, and it was distracting her from keeping her tongue in place. I rushed, without thinking, to pull down her skirt, but they pushed me away before I could successfully cover her up.

Of course, Pat did not swallow her tongue, but I think that would have been a more favorable outcome. I know I would have rather swallowed my tongue than have everyone see my pink underwear. At least they would have had something else to talk about, "Poor Alicia. Can you believe she swallowed her tongue?" " She was such a nice girl." As opposed to "Did you get a look at those underwear? How about those fat legs?" From that day on, I lived in mortal fear of collapsing and showing everyone my chubby legs and underwear, and I hated Pat for exposing me this kind of humiliation was possible.

Every few months, I was forced to face this fear of exposure. The principal of our school felt that Fridays should be spent out of the classroom. That would have been great if his field trips had held any appeal to the student body. We would ramble up to Burger King in our huge yellow bus and all of us would get out for milkshakes. I am sure we were hated by the employees. I would often find a piece of plastic or paper in my shake. One time, I found the leg of a cockroach, long and hairy, in the bottom of my chocolate milkshake. The next time I abstained from any sort of treat, which was, I am sure, the desired effect. On another field trip, we went to a man's

house, deep in the woods. The attraction was a small monkey the man kept in a cage in his back yard. Mr. Chapman did not teach us anything about the life or habits of monkeys. We just stood there drinking our milkshakes while the monkey sat on his ass in the corner.

Mr. Sheldon Chapman was an unusual man, and I am convinced he was a closet sadomasochist. On days when we did not go to Burger King or see monkeys, we had field day. I would have slurped up a thousand roach-filled milkshakes to avoid field day. Field day was a day of random torture, but the most feared torture device for me was the Big Yellow Ball. Sadistic Sheldon would drag out this huge yellow ball and expect us to run as fast as we could, in our uniformed skirts, and then attempt to jump on top of this ball. The yellow ball may as well have been the sun. It was twice as tall as the second grader that would attempt to conquer it, and it would take five pairs of arms to reach around its circumference. Few could accomplish the feat of springing to the top of this ball, and certainly not a forty-eight inch tall second grader, but you were guaranteed to show your underwear and the chubby legs your skirt attempted to cover. I remember the terror I felt, while sitting in class, when I would hear that ball come bouncing out of the storage room: Bong! Bong! Bong! I would immediately begin to plot my escape. I was not a sophisticated child, so a bomb threat was beyond my game plan. I generally relied on the old stomachache / nauseous feeling, but my teachers stopped falling for that because I often wanted to go home, so they stopped believing my complaints. Mrs. Geraldine would announce to the class that it was field day and we should pick up our books and get ready to go outside. I would reluctantly stand-up, while those around me cheered and excitedly pushed their chairs under their desks. My eyes would meet Pat, who sat across the room from me, and I would recognize the trepidation I felt in her eyes. We both knew field day was not fun for fat girls, and I hated her for knowing how I felt.

Once outside, I would stand in line behind the others who could not wait their turn. They would ask to "cut' and of course I was happy to accommodate. If I put it off, maybe something would happen to get me out of this situation. Maybe it would begin to lightning, or maybe someone would have pointy tennis shoes and the ball would collapse like a popped balloon. While I was in line, I would try to remember what underwear I had worn that

day. Was it the cute panties with the pink ribbons? Or was it the yellow panties with the turtle? I looked at Pat and wondered what she had to be afraid of; she had already been initiated into the hall of shameful underwear showers. Pat looked at me as if to say, "Now it is your turn to be shamed. You have dodged it long enough."

It was at times like this that I longed to be Jimmy; afraid of nothing. His most private moments were open to the public. He was never afraid of exposure, or what someone else thought. He was blissfully unaware of the eyes cutting critically in his direction. His life must be Utopia, crazy or not, he was free. Free to pick his nose, free to have a hairdo that was not quite right, free to have fat thighs. What a lucky guy.

But I was not that free. The ball awaits my failure. I refused to go down that easy though. There were still six people ahead of me. I had time to think. I wondered what Nancy Drew would do. Bess would somehow create a distraction and then Nancy would jump into the car with Ned Nickerson and disappear, her strawberry-blonde hair blowing in the wind. But then I thought, "Nancy Drew would never be in this shameful situation." She would run, her thin thighs never touching one another, her panties not even a thought, and jump on top the ball to the cheers of everyone. I looked around for an escape route, but I could find no means of deliverance. As the line grew shorter and the ball came closer, I knew I would find some way to avoid this humiliation. No one had identified me with Pat; I was not called "fatty, fatty two by four" like Pat. I had avoided the exposure by playing it safe, lurking in the shadows and never calling attention to myself. I thought this day would be no different.

I would like to say that like the "crafty Odysseus" I found a way out of the line. Or even better, that I ran as hard as I could, my short, stubby legs pumping like pistons, and I jumped on top of the ball, never revealing my chubby thighs or pink underwear.

But that is not what happened. My time up, I walked like a prisoner to her execution. The much-hated Mr. Chapman, wearing a knit cap and a whistle around his neck, signaled me to move up in line and start running. I could feel my heart beating in my ears. It was much like the feeling I had when I saw Pat's legs in the air. I began to run, knowing that it was hopeless. I never made it to the ball. I tripped on my shoelace and fell long before I got

to the mountaintop. I jumped up as quickly as I could, unsure of what had been exposed during my fall. Mr. Chapman was already blowing his whistle for the next runner. The world had not imploded. There were no large groups of kids standing around, pointing and laughing. My heart was still beating. I looked around and saw Pat Copeland looking at me. She had a small smile on her pudgy face.

I'm in Love With a Girl Who Smokes Cigarettes Like She Owns the World and Isn't Afraid of the Bomb

Kevin Daiss

Quake,
Shuddershoulder quickly down the avenue
As you step gingerly over cracks and leaves
Fallen to the ground-
Cast aside cast aways from us.
Breathe with a pause in mid-thought
(cigarette dangling from your fingers like a rose)
And close your eyes to relish the indistinct blur of motion
Put in front of you by the birds lazily sewing patterns in the clouds.
Before today you were always reflective,
But this morning in the mirror you decided to be a lighthouse
For anyone looking lost or anyone dodging dark.
And,
O what a light you are!
Cast your net of goldenrod imitative daytime
Over the sky and
Sing!
Sing for the night clouds you illuminate,
And sing for the drunken fishermen you humiliate.
Praise the highest power for your
Talent.
You do not dream so easily as me,
You are never really asleep.
Blending in with daytime at noon
You're still vigilant-
Though naïve and ambivalent.
So step cautiously still down your dusk-darkened road
Until the neighbors all stare and point their fingers
At the fucking freak with a light on her face
And a cigarette in her hand.
Dance circular in the gutter
With hand pointed straight up,
Straight up,
Straight up at the stars
Your best friends
And call out the moon as your enemy.
Waltz to the end of your block and light another cigarette;

Light it for the future,
For the kids and the
Colors in their eyes.
You'll be bright.
Beautiful.
Blinding.

I Can Give You the Gift of the Moon's Shine

Kevin Daiss

I've been in the city bottlenecking
And breathing
Slower than the cruisers that cruise their cars at night.
I play records at the lowest RPM
So the words come out
Without sounding uptight.
I hide out
In the dive down
Stairways
Up to heaven,
Come down Lord,
Carry me home.
The Bible Belt
Gets looser on my hips
As I kiss
Die cast aluminum lips.
I spill the salt from my teeth
Into the street
And there's a man
Who will lick it from my shoes.
He asks for the time
But I just hand him the MoonShine.
I tell him, "Drink this my friend
And let the stars in your eyes live.
Let them sparkle with the city's tower lights."

Paper Dolls

Brandi Kincaid

You might not know it by looking at me but I come from a family of nomads. My mother, the leader of our tribe, has packed and unpacked us from one city to another for as long as I can remember. We've moved for business, and for pleasure, and sometimes I think we just did it to move our bodies, to make sure our feet didn't get too comfortable. When you are raising two young girls on what my mother used to call "twenty-five dollars and love," you learn to entertain yourselves creatively. Surprisingly enough, travel can be very cheap.

Mind you, when I say cheap, I also have to point out that this was about the time that Motel 6 was keeping the light on for people all across the great states, and almost every restaurant you found let kids eat for free. We collected little plastic toys from diners all across America to add to our ever-growing piles of junk. But cheap meals and plastic toys were not the more enticing part of a car trip. For a little girl with traveling in her blood, it was always about change. The thought of the inside of the car excited my otherwise stable being into a frenzy of preparation.

The year we decided to travel cross-country, my family owned a faded Ford Thunderbird with a torn red interior. It had a musty smell that can come from two children and a dog. I memorized the inside of the car that year. I knew every tear in the fabric, every pocket made by holes; I had hiding places long before we left. I made mental maps of how much stuff I could cram into any given space, and where, after I had shoved every book and Barbie that I owned into those spaces, I would sit. Packing was almost as exciting as being somewhere new. My sister, younger and less experienced, always wanted to sit up front. I assume this made her feel important or more in charge to sit closer to my mother. I, older and much wiser, knew better. I knew that packing was only fun if you had somewhere to put it. I knew that the backseat was like getting an entirely new room.

With my new room on the horizon, I planned: books on the seat, Barbies on the floor, tape player on my lap. My father had to work this year so my sister got her wish for the front seat and I was allowed to confiscate the back.

"He's simply to busy," my mother would explain, "We'll call him from the road, you'll see, it will be like he's with us." She smiled at my sister to make it all make sense and I caught her eyes as a tinge of what I now consider to be fear entered her voice. Virginia to New Mexico was where we were headed – four days there and four days back.

On a tight budget, we never left the house unprepared. My mother was careful to make sure we had snacks, drinks, and food for the lunches we ate either while riding, or pulled off alongside the highway. My mother, always frugal, packed food for meals inside of an old cooler with a stained white plastic interior that made it look dirty when actually clean. It had a blue lid that carried teeth marks from every childhood dog I could remember. There was lunchmeat, mayonnaise, bread, and pickles; all I ever remember eating while moving. Attached to the side of the cooler was a cookie cutter in the shape of a circle. When the temptations of the roadside McDonalds was too great for too little girls to bear, my mother made us magic food. In seconds she could take a square turkey sandwich and make moons, both half and full. That was the year, if memory serves, that my sister, queen of the food fetish, decided that cheese sandwiches were all she wanted for lunch. Riding in the car meal after meal, I finally realized that is the moon really was made of cheese, the man that lived there must have been American.

We left Virginia at six o'clock in the morning on the hottest day I can remember. I have often thought, since first recalling that day, that it must have been impossible to be that hot that early in the morning, but that's how it lives in my memory, and I never argue with memory. Drug from our beds, my sister and I grabbed the few remaining toys we had kept out the night before and slumped into our positions in the already packed car. To be more specific, while my sister slumped, I climbed. It is an artful thing to be able to climb so gracefully over the mountain of junk that I had so carefully placed into position the night before. Weaving myself into place among toys, I strapped myself in and fell quickly to sleep. I opened my eyes periodically when I felt the car stop, usually so that my mother could make a phone call, though I never saw her lips move at the phone. She always just returned to the car and began driving again. She could drive for eight hours straight without needing rest.

I woke up to the sound of rustling plastic that could

only mean my sister was into the snack bag already. I found her, mesmerized by cheese puffs, staring at the cows that were grazing in the rural Virginia pasture we were passing. I watched one cheese puff after another mechanically being put in her mouth, one hardly chewed before another was already on its way. "Slow down," my mother would remind her, cautious of little kid's stomachs on a road that was nowhere near ending.

I took out an apple, handed my mom a book on tape, and asked her to turn it up. "Make it loud," I said, ready for the voices of people outside the family fill my head. I brought three stacks of books on tape that year, just enough to go an entire day without repeating one. Whenever I am reading now, I can still, when the room is very quiet, hear that "ding" reminding me to turn the page. I always instinctively jump to flip it over; afraid I'll miss something if I waste time.

Now for as much as my family likes to move, we like to make things harder than they ever need to be. My poor mother had been driving for about six hours when the traffic began to slow somewhere near Georgia. My sister and I, being curious young girls, wiggled half our bodies out the windows until we could see what was up ahead. Cars were filing off left and right, directed by a policeman with a staunch appearance and small red flag. My mother calmed her very scared and interested little girls by explaining that the nice policeman wanted only to say hello and look at all the fabulous toys we had brought. As a six-year-old, I bought it. Looking back I realize that "say hello meant search for drugs.

When the police officer got to our car he asked us to pull to the right. I was confused by the direction, sure that he would be so impressed by the haircuts I had so lovingly given to my now bald Barbies, that he would tell us to follow the line of cars continuing down the road. My mother, trying desperately not to panic, was ushered away from the car. My sister and I escorted to another area, and the car searched, piece-by-piece. I was astonished by their lack of grace. How dare they mess up my well-organized system of junk! How dare they mix up the order I had meticulously arranged my books in! I felt an urge inside of me to scream out, to inform them of their grave mistake in placing Barbie next to Ken (they were fighting), and confusing my audio books with my music tapes. I said nothing. I saw the frustration in my mother's eyes as

they left all our belongings laid out on the ground and left for another car. Again, piece-by-piece, everything was put back into the car. I never achieved the grand display I once had, and my back seat room never did feel quite as comfortable. In the end, after the heat from the sun and having to put back together our mess, it felt nice to be inside the car again.

Just as we all took a deep breath, pausing to feel the relief of air conditioning and the rumble of a moving car, my sister looked up at my mother with tears in her eyes and threw up a bag and a half worth of cheese puffs all over her pillow. The heat from our stop had upset her tiny stomach, causing the over-processed food to revisit us. We pulled over again, only miles from where we had just been searched; just been made to stand in the hot sun while men of the law vigorously rummaged through our things. I guess the stop makes sense though, when you think about it. What is more suspicious in the field of drug trafficking than a young mother and her two daughters, one covered in orange cheese dust, and another surrounded by thin, plastic doll hair that she does not understand will grow back.

My mother, who has always seemed to me to be unshakable, took the pillow out of the car and peeled away the carrot colored case only to reveal a well-saturated pillow that would be, for the rest of the trip, out of service. She crammed the pillow in between two suitcases in the trunk and got back into the car. The smell of the incident had started to subside some b then, not that it really mattered. When you are around small children a great deal of the time, you become more difficult to decide whether it's the smell of secondhand lunch, or an elementary school hallway that you are smelling; it is difficult to remember which smell came first.

We spent the first night in a motel just inside Georgia, leaving just early enough to partake in the motel's stale continental breakfast, swap our cheese stained pillow for one of theirs, and for my mother to make another string of calls that never called upon her to speak. We somehow managed to travel most of the next two days without incident. One state blurred into the next as we traveled west, eager to reach New Mexico, to see my mother's parents, and finally return home. The luster of my new backseat room had worn off somewhere between Mississippi and Texas, and as I looked out over the great expanse

of dirt beyond the car; I began to long for the home I had been so eager to leave behind. In the tight backseat I began to forget what it was about my Barbie bungalow that had enthralled me in the beginning. I wanted out of the car and out of this state of dirt. I wanted my home.

It wasn't until we were a good fifty miles away from our third motel when I realized I had left my Ken doll tanning by the side of the tub, catching rays from the fluorescent bulb above. Horrified that my Barbie would be alone, I cried until we reached a small town with two churches and a gas station/general store. My mother, annoyed more by mine and Barbie's dependence on the Ken doll than the crying, finally consented to giving me a few dollars to purchase another. I walked into the store and silently filtered through one aisle after another, searching for something that might work as a mate for my doll. I ended up settling for Juan, a large, Latin doll with beautiful traditional clothing, and the head the size of Barbie's body. They were an odd couple to say the least; I was forced to keep them in counseling for the rest of the trip. "She'd be fine on her own, you know," my mother would say. It wasn't that I didn't believe her; I just wasn't ready to change Barbie's life around when she had so recently been shocked by our change in scenery.

We reached New Mexico just as my sister was beginning to forget the words to all her favorite songs. This is a great thing for a five year old, because when you are five and you forget the words to a song, you don't stop singing, you simply stop singing the words you don't know. No one, even a six year old can hear "John Jacob, Jingleheimer-Schmidt" fifteen times in a row, especially when its only identifying lyric is "na na na na na na na," a line traditionally meant to lead into another verse, a verse my sister had forgotten back in Alabama.

Pulling up to my grandmother's house, my mother excused herself to use the phone while I unloaded my sister from the seat where she had somehow stuck herself to the cushion with a combination of gum and ribbon that had, at one point, been in her hair. My grandmother took us inside and we sat surrounded by shelves full of trinkets and mementos, all of which made her smile as she walked past them to the kitchen. As expected, she brought us juice and cookies, the expensive kind that are dusted with sugar and stored in a tin covered in pictures of faraway places. She offered to read a story as grandfather talked to

our mother outside where we were not aloud to go. I had better plans than story hour, and I walked though the kitchen, past the half bathroom, and into her bedroom. There in her closets were dresses for big girls fashioned like the ones my Barbie wore. Her dresses, hats, and jewelry kept me fascinated and I hardly noticed my mother crying outside. "Stress," my grandmother explained. "All that driving wears a girl out," she lied.

The next morning I woke up excited about the day ahead, all the time to be spent with my grandparents. All night I had dreamed about mud pies, dress up, and story hour. When I got down the stairs though, our bags had been packed up and were resting by the door. My mother was whispering in the next room, and my grandmother did not have the stove on. I was befuddled. If the stove wasn't on, how would she make me Flintstone Pancakes? And why, after all the time I had taken setting up my even newer room upstairs, had all my things been packed away again? I crept into the kitchen and pulled at my mother's side. "It's time to go," was all she said in a fake, cheery voice that must have convinced me at the time, because I went upstairs and woke up my little sister. I was sure that there was more adventure waiting ahead.

As we packed the car, I noticed we had one more suitcase than when we had left Virginia. My toys had also been placed in the trunk, leaving a large space in the backseat that I hadn't made myself. I immediately realized my mother must have been thinking ahead about a beauty shop for those Barbies I had been working on, and I went back in the house to thank her. Once there she explained that my grandmother was coming home with us. "Just for a little while," she said. Confused, but not upset, I climbed into the car, not needing to wiggle into the now sparse space.

The days that followed were full of laughter and stories. My grandmother, the best roommate I may every have, showered me with tales of love and success, played cards for hours, and braided my hair three different ways all displayed on my head at once. My grandmother always knew how to make me beautiful. I was so captivated in the excitement of the ride that I almost did not notice when we pulled into our driveway. With stiff legs, I climbed out of the car and stretched my way up to the front door. As my mother unlocked it I noticed something was missing. The chair, where my father sat and read, was gone. His glasses

that always sat on the table next to the television were gone too. The only thing left on the table was the message machine, blinking a bright red twenty-one, a number I had never seen flash before. Sensing panic and deep breaths coming from my mother, I ran through each room. If it was a robbery, I thought, he probably went for my room first. Thank god I took my dolls with me. But nothing was gone from my room. My sister's was just as she had left it, and the guest room even had the two paper people I had made and left the week before lying on the bed.

When I reached my parents room my mother had already caught up with me. She walked into the half empty room and looked around before I could push past her myself. A piece of paper on the dresser made her cry, and I hugged tightly to her legs. I looked over into the closet my parents shared and noticed an empty space where my father's shoes had been. It was that very moment that I knew I was a nomad; it was in my blood.

It's been years now since that trip across country, and I still think about my backseat room and the stinky orange pillow. I wonder if someone else got that pillow, and a very disturbed part of me wishes they did. I do not like to drive anymore, and my nomadic ways have filtered into other areas of my life. I'm amazed by how much, and yet how little, I can recall about those days, when I thought moving had no consequence and travel was a game designed to keep me entertained. I can remember in detail how the policeman looked that pulled us over, the bedspread designs in hotels, and the voices from the books we listened to. Ironically, I cannot remember much about my father. He lives in my memory as an excuse; my mother's excuse. The only part of him that I am sure about is the space left on the closet carpet where his shoes had been. I often wonder if he had to move, if the possibility of a new room was simply too great to pass up.

Snake Oil
Karen Harrell

Southern Women smell like department stores.
The foundations and oils,
Perfumes that aren't cheap, but smell that way,
The patently medical remedies for the disastrous ravages of age and time.

Forgoing the sweet magnolia and mists of bourbon,
These regal women search for the empty quick-fix.
The walk into the carnival of cubes,
Straining to hear the soft-spoken barkers of today, pushing their wares.

Every barker looks the same:
Over-made face, helmet hair, glazed eyes that dart from one mart to another.
They are robotic in their movements,
Feet turn into rotors, zeroing in on a lone, genteel lady looking at lipstick.

"Oh no, no, wrong shade," the litany begins.
Age-defying, wrinkle-reducing, and Alpha-Hydroxy have replaced
vapors, eye strain, and fainting couches.
The perfect red can moisturize and erase the pains of living and dying.

Next come the peeling, mud masks, and detoxifying toners.
No self-preserving Scarlett needs to rely on lavender oil and rose water.
Firming lotion negates hard farm work.
The good, strong equatorial sun is shunned for bronzers and potions.

By reaching perfumes and notions, the barker has lost the glassy eyes.
Her peepers twinkle with delight at tangible commission, that dollar for degradation.
The shadow of the juniper rose has been erased and transplanted,
Now the carnation, bland and generic, reigns supreme.

Fat Boy

Judy McDaniel

They always chose a table near the rear wall of the pleasant neighborhood restaurant,
situated out of the mainstream comings and goings of a bustling dinner crowd. Pete Parson liked to treat his family to a nice dinner once a month or so, although his wife, Martha, thought it a waste of money, preferring her own cooking to restaurant fare. Ralph didn't care one way or another as long as he had plenty to eat and his chocolate milk to drink. The rich smells of southern country cooking threatened to engulf the family each time the kitchen doors swung open, and he retreated into the world of food. Ralph Parsons was thirteen years old, and morbidly obese. He walked with difficulty, pausing often to catch his breath. Eating was a different story; Ralph could put away all of the food within his immediate grasp with hardly a pause. That's exactly what he had done until he realized the others at the table had finished and were waiting for him.

"All set?" Pete asked, rising from his chair. His mother, Jane Parsons (whom they all called Nana), pushed back her chair, and began plucking at purse and sweater in that peculiar manner of women as they prepare to relocate themselves. Martha had ordered another chocolate milk for Ralph and was waiting for him to finish it.

"You all go on out," she said. "We're right behind you. Finish your milk, Ralph, and let's go."

As Nana followed Pete to the cashier's stand, Ralph began the tedious business of getting up from his chair. Martha helped the boy to his feet, and the pair began their cumbrous way across the dining room, Ralph using his mother's arm to maintain his balance. Because he was so fat, he gave the appearance of being sloppy. In truth, the boy wore pretty nice clothes; his mother saw to that. The problem was that his shirts always looked two sizes too small, they way they stretched across his stomach. His shorts were the same loose-fitting style that the other guys wore, but on him, they looked ridiculous. Martha was a large woman, noticeably overweight herself, so it was not surprising that they became an embarrassing center of attention. Conversation ceased at nearby tables; eyes first stared, then averted.

An older woman observed the boy with pity, comment-

ing to her husband, "Look at that poor child, Bill. He has such trouble walking."
Bill turned slightly in his chair, watched Ralph and his mother for a moment, and replied,
"He does seem miserable, but look at his mother. I'd say they've got a real weight crisis going on."

"You're probably right," said his wife, but I feel sorry for the boy. Surely, something
could be done for him." They returned to their dinner and the conversation in which they had been involved.

Martha was very much aware of the looks and comments directed their way. "I told your father we should eat at home," she grumbled. Ralph sighed. Truth be known, he'd rather eat at home, too, rather than undergo the painful scrutiny that dining out entailed. Arriving at the front door of the restaurant, they found that Pete had pulled the car up to meet them, a kindness on his part. None of the family spoke during the short drive home, although Pete obviously had something on his mind. They dropped Nana off at her house, just a couple of streets over from the Parson home.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Ralph," Nana said as she got out of the car. "You all have a nice evening, and thanks for dinner, Pete."

Later, when Pete and Martha were alone in their bedroom, he asked her, "Can't you do anything about Ralph and the way he eats? He won't live to see eighteen the way he's going."

"So why is it my fault?" demanded Martha, laboriously getting into bed. "I don't see you getting on to him about his eating habits."

"What is it you always say - the family weight problem?" asked Pete sarcastically. "Well, you're right. Your family does have a problem and you're passing it on to our son."

Martha gave her husband a sullen look, saying, "I don't want to talk about it. Ralph has a problem, but he'll grow out of it. He's OK." End of conversation, as far as she was concerned.

Pete sighed, thinking that their conversations always wound up like this when he wanted to talk about Ralph. The boy needed some kind of help and Pete was at a loss as to what should be done. He knew he never was much of a disciplinarian; Martha was pretty much in charge. And why not? He worked hard all day; it wasn't up to him to solve all of the family problems, was it?

Next morning, Pete helped Ralph get his books and

stuff into the car, waited while his son got in, and headed off toward the school. Both enjoyed this brief time together each morning, although each was aware that Pete drove Ralph to school because the boy could not climb onto the school bus. *Man, Pete sometimes thought. We moved into this neighborhood because of the schools and the poor guy can't even ride the bus with the other kids. He's got to be miserable..* Pete's thoughts were cut short as they pulled up to the school drive.

"See you later, buddy," said his dad. "You planning on going to Nana's house after school?"

"Sure, Dad. She'll pick me up. I'll see you." And Ralph began his day at school. Nana did, in fact, pick up Ralph most days, and they had a special visit at her house. She worried about her grandson. *That Martha, she thought, set a poor example for Ralph, constantly cooking and baking and loading them all up with rich foods and sodas. Thank goodness, none of it stuck to Pete!* At her house, Ralph ate healthy snacks, and she was able to distract him from wanting more to eat by engaging him in a new video game or a book she had bought for him. Still, she was growing more anxious about him. Nana had studiously avoided a confrontation with her daughter-in-law. Martha was as defensive as a mama bear when it came to protecting her offspring. Seeing Pete drive by with Ralph on the way to school, Nana made up her mind - *enough is enough, she decided. I've got to intervene.*

Going to his grandmother's house was the highlight of Ralph's day, considering that school was becoming more and more uncomfortable for him. He experienced physical pain at times, like when he had to pick up his books that another boy had "inadvertently" knocked out of his arms. Most of his pain was psychological, though. He was considered a freak by many of the middle schoolers, some of whom had been his friends in elementary school. Hardly a day passed without an encounter with one or two boys as they all converged on their lockers between classes. Someone always seemed to bump into him, sometimes hard enough to almost throw him off balance, sometimes just enough to make him drop something, and they would ridicule his attempt to pick up the fallen objects.

"Hey Ralph, going out for football this semester?" one would ask.

"Yeah," said another. "You can be the ball."

Ralph usually said nothing; he just wanted them to go away. Occasionally, they got to him, and he came back with "Leave me alone. Get out of my face and leave me alone." Ralph was usually pretty docile, a good target for taunting, so when he did retaliate, the others generally left him alone. In class, he had use the desk provided for students with disabilities because he was too fat to sit in the conventional desk chairs. A bright boy, Ralph appeared dull and slow because he seldom spoke up in any of his classes. *If only he could be invisible, he often thought. If only he didn't have to go to school at all.*

The worst part of Ralph's day was lunchtime. His mother packed his lunch because he was unable to squeeze through the lunch line. By the time he made his way to the cafeteria, most everyone else was seated, and the usual clamor of conversation and utensils was well under way. A few of the boys and girls teased him as he searched for an empty table, making fun of his unusually large lunch bag.

"What's in the bag, Ralph?" was often the question, asked in a mocking tone of voice.

"Bet you've got enough stuff in there for all of us," was another common jibe.

Once settled at a table, Ralph spread out his lunch. And what a lunch it was! It was apparent that Martha didn't want her Ralph to go hungry, judging from the number of generous-sized sandwiches, chips, and cookies, plus a quart of chocolate milk. While he ate, Ralph was able to zone out of his surroundings and the mean kids who teased him all of the time. He thought about going to Nana's house later; she always had snacks and never made fun of him.

So went the fat boy's day, every day, Monday through Friday, a miserable life for a thirteen-year-old. So it might have continued, were it not for a casual remark made by the school track coach. It was Ralph's habit to sit on a bench during the required Physical Education period, and watch the other guys perform their track and field events. He was unable to participate, but had to sit there, just the same. On this particular afternoon, Coach Keely came over and sat down next to him.

"Say, Ralph," asked the coach, "have you ever thought about walking a little on the track? It would give you a little exercise. I don't mean getting out

there like those guys," gesturing to a
group running relays. "Might help with your breathing, too."

Ralph was both stunned and apprehensive. "I don't think I could do that, Coach," he said.
I can't walk very far, and besides, the guys would laugh me right off the track."

Coach Keely let that comment rest for a couple of minutes as he and Ralph watched the activity on the field. "I'll tell you what, Ralph. If you can stay a little while after regular school
hours, we'll both do a little walking. What do you say?"

Ralph was speechless. Before he could think up a reason to say no, he blurted out, "OK."
He knew Nana wouldn't mind picking him up a little later. As long as nobody else knew - he couldn't

take much more ridicule, and he voiced this worry to the coach. Coach Keely gave him a thumbs up sign, and grinned as if to say, " this is our little project."

Nana knew immediately, as Ralph eased himself into the car, that he was worrying over some new problem. She knew, too, that he would tell her about it when he was ready. Later, over fruit bars and milk - white, reduced fat milk, the story came out.

"Nana," Ralph began. "Coach Keely wants me to walk with him after school. I told him OK, but that was dumb. I should have told him I can't do it." Clearly, the boy was both elated and scared. His grandmother was also elated; she encouraged Ralph to take Coach Keely up on his offer. She would pick him up a little later - no problem. She sensed that Martha Parsons would be the problem, that she would not take kindly to this unexpected change of plans. Nana decided that it was time to have a few words with Mama Bear about what might be the beginning of a new interest for Ralph. This was the opportunity Nana had been waiting for; now she had a good reason to intervene for Ralph's own good.

Like clockwork, Martha was in the kitchen, preparing dinner when Nana brought
Ralph home. She had to admit the house smelled wonderful, the tantalizing smells of a chicken roasting in the oven and freshly-made brownies on the table, competing with one another for attention.

"Staying for dinner, Jane?" asked Martha. His grandmother usually dropped Ralph off at his house without coming in.

"No, thank you, Martha. Ralph has some exciting news to share!" Jane replied. "Tell your mother," she said to her grandson. Ralph explained the coach's offer, hoping his mother would approve of the new venture.

"Out of the question. You know you can't do any extra walking," Martha said to Ralph. "You might fall down. How do you know that coach won't just leave you out there by yourself?"
Nana indicated with a nod to Ralph that he should make himself scarce while she and his mother talked about the issue.

"Martha," said Nana, when she finally was able to get a word in. "You want the best for Ralph; I know that. Have you really looked at him, lately? He's getting so fat, it's hard for him to get around. He doesn't say much, but I know the other kids are sometimes pretty mean to him."

Martha was getting upset with her mother-in-law. What did she think she was doing, coming in here and trying to tell her how to raise her own son?

"I don't know what your problem is, Jane. Ralph is still carrying around a lot of baby fat.
He'll lose some of it, you'll see. I do everything in my power to make that boy happy, and you have no right to question what I do." It was obvious that Martha would not be swayed, even if Nana talked herself blue in the face. Fortunately, Pete arrived home in the midst of the argument. Once apprised of Coach Keely's offer, he was amazed. Leaving the two women to their quarrel, he sought out Ralph in order to gauge his son's feelings about such a major deviation from his normal routine.

"What about it, Son? Is this something you really want to try?"

"I want to try, Dad, but I'm scared. I want to show Coach Keely how glad I am that he thinks I can do this. If I fail, it sure won't be the first time, and everybody laughs at me, anyway."

Pete winced at his son's perception of ridicule. Putting his hand on Ralph's shoulder, he said, "I'm with you on this, and for what's its worth, I think you can do it." He made up his mind that Martha would have to understand that Ralph was old enough and, somehow, wise enough to make this decision. She had to turn loose; that was her main problem. Pete was no psychiatrist, but he could see Martha and her cooking as some kind of control. *Probably the way her mother*

raised her, he mused. He returned to the kitchen where his wife and his mother seemed on the verge of an uneasy truce.

"Martha," he told her, This afternoon walking with the coach is something Ralph really wants to do, and I'm proud of him for wanting to try. Let's support him in this." The conversation ended soon, with Martha grudgingly in agreement and Nana secretly pleased.

"Listen, you two," Nana said. "I really am happy for Ralph and I 'm glad we all agree that he should take the coach up on his offer." That said, she was out of the door, and looking forward to seeing her grandson after the school the following day.

Ralph was nervous the next afternoon, as he waited for Coach by the bench where they

had talked the day before. He hoped nobody was watching, and he hoped he wouldn't fall down; he hoped Coach Keely hadn't been putting him on. What if he didn't come? Well, that would be OK, too, Ralph thought. Then he wouldn't have to do it after all. Ralph had barely put his thoughts together, when he saw the coach striding across the track.

"OK, Ralph?" he asked with the grin that would become very familiar to Ralph.

"As ready as I'll ever be, I guess," was the boy's reply.

"Then let's do it!" Arm in arm, they began to walk. It was slow going, with frequent stops for Ralph to catch his breath. Coach didn't try to engage him in conversation; extended walking was enough for Ralph to handle. His whole body strained as he struggled to put one foot in front of the other, the overweight body that was unused to the effort now demanded of it. Sweat poured off of him and he really did feel like he was going to fall over any minute. Coach Keely was well aware of Ralph's poor physical condition and the huge amount of fat he carried on his relatively short frame. He called a halt after about fifteen minutes, assuring Ralph they would add a few minutes and a few more yards of track each day.

"You can do this, Ralph. I know you can," were the coach's parting words. Ralph was hurting. Everything hurt, even his throat rasped from practically gasping for breath.

What have I gotten myself into, he wondered. He dried himself off and waited for Nana.

What was I thinking of...I can't do this. Nana was so enthusiastic he wanted to throw up.

"What do **you** know, Nana," Ralph finally burst out.

"What makes everybody think I can get out and walk? I can't even walk down the hall in time for my next class." Nana let him talk, saying no more until they were seated in her sunny kitchen.

"Ralph, honey," Nana began. "Nobody is forcing you to do anything you don't want to do. Want to know what I think? I think you really want to prove to yourself that you can successfully take on this challenge, scary as it may be."

Ralph finished his milk before he answered her. "You're right , Nana, all the way around.
I do want to do it and it is scary. And you know what? I'm going out on that track tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. May I have some more milk, please?"

Little by little, Ralph began walking for longer periods, forcing himself to breathe evenly,
and focus on the business of one step at a time. There were times when he wanted to stop, to give up, but he kept walking. For a while, he didn't want to let his new friend and mentor down; soon, he realized this was for himself. His dad always asked him how he was doing, and Ralph knew he was proud. His mom still wasn't particularly thrilled, but Ralph figured she'd come around.

One afternoon, Coach Keely stopped Ralph in the hall and said that he would be running a few minutes late for their afternoon walk, but that Ralph should go ahead and get started without him. Later, stepping out on the track alone, Ralph had a few minutes of panic, the old fear of falling down washing over him. He walked for five minutes or so, before he saw the coach watching him from the sidelines.

"Hey, Coach, are you coming?" Ralph called out to him.

"You walk and I'll watch from here." was the reply.

Ralph was excited when Nana came for him. "Guess what, Nana!" he exclaimed. "Coach tricked me today and I had to walk by myself, and you know what? I did it. Boy, am I hungry!"
Nana allowed an extra fruit bar and, as they sat her kitchen table, she questioned her grandson about his new activity. Gently, she suggested they take a new approach to his eating habits in an effort to boost his energy and endurance. She knew, even as she made the suggestion, how Martha would react if Ralph started turning down some of her biscuits and gravy, her fried chicken and potatoes. Her daughter-in-law would first assume Ralph was coming down with

something, then figure that she, Nana, had put him up to turning away from the extra portions that he normally ate with relish. Well, she'd let the situation play out and see what happened.

That very evening, Ralph declined second helpings of both his favorite potato salad and Martha's tender pot roast. When he failed to ask for more chocolate milk, she could stand it no longer.

"Are you feeling sick, Ralph?" she asked. "You've hardly eaten a thing."

"I'm fine, Mom, just cutting back a little to get in better shape."

Pete had an idea that Ralph knew exactly what he was doing. "Give him a break, Martha.
We both know he'll eat when he wants to."

The lunches Ralph took to school seemed to increase in volume, though, Martha's way
of making sure he son got enough to eat. Ralph still came into the cafeteria after everyone else, found his lonely table, and spread out the contents of his bag, seemingly oblivious to the smart remarks coming from the other tables. His big lunch seemed overwhelming now that he was walking more and eating a little less at home. He knew what he had to do: he ate what he wanted, then walked deliberately to the bin labeled for surplus food, and tossed about half of his carefully and lovingly

prepared lunch into it. His actions did not go unnoticed, but nobody said anything as Ralph lumbered out of the cafeteria.

The word was out - Ralph Parsons was acting weird. A couple of the guys followed him that afternoon and hid behind some of the benches that lined the track. Ralph and Coach Keely stepped onto the track and started walking. They walked about half-way around, turned, and walked back to their starting point.

"Good walk, Ralph," said Coach. "Tomorrow, it's one full lap. Think you're up for it?"

"Yes, Sir!" Ralph responded. "I'll sure try."

Next day, a few more students showed up to watch Ralph Parsons walk a complete lap around the track, and nobody heckled or taunted him. Nobody said a word, actually. Ralph knew they were there; they probably expected me to fall over before I got half-way around, he thought. He showed them that he could do it, didn't he?

He told Nana about the guys coming out to watch him. "How do you feel about that now,
Ralph?" she asked.

"I'm OK with it, Nana, as long as they don't start giving me a hard time about it." Nana wasn't at all sure things were going to continue as smoothly as Ralph thought. She knew a thing or two about kids that age and was pretty sure Ralph was in for more taunting sooner or later.

"Leave yourself some room, Ralph," she said. "And whatever happens, you'll deal with it." And she gave him a big hug.

His mother had calmed down about his new eating habits, although she still gave him the
"clean your plate" bit almost every day. Pete said little, other than to suggest to Ralph that they go to the mall on Saturday and get some stuff like good walking shoes and maybe some new pants, since the ones he was wearing were getting a little baggy. It was as though everyone, students and family, waited for the other shoe to fall - for Ralph to go back to being his usual fat, lazy self and for the kids at school to start in on him again. In the meantime, they humored him. That Saturday, before the mall trip, Pete took Ralph to the barbershop. While they waited their turns, Ralph noticed that the barbers had to stop and sweep up after every two or three customers. He thought they needed someone to do the sweeping, but that was as far as the thought went.

Later that day, Pete asked Ralph if he wanted to go out and toss a football for a while.

"Hey, Dad, where did the football come from?" Ralph wanted to know.

"It's my old ball," his dad replied. I played a little football in high school, and for some reason, I kept this one. Good thing, right?"

The following Monday, Ralph had a funny feeling when he got to school. It wasn't anything he could put his finger on, but something was going on. He found out pretty soon when he got to his locker. A bunch of the guys were just standing around.

"Hey, Ralphie," said one of them. "You sure look funny out there with Coach."

"You're too big and fat to be somebody's pet, aren't you, Ralphie?" from another.

"He thinks he's going to be a big track star, I guess," a third chimed in.

Ralph knew he had to say something; he wasn't about to let them scare him off.

"So, what's wrong with walking around on the track? It's better than sitting on the bench and watching you guys out there." He waited, hoping now that they had had their fun, they'd leave him alone. The bell rang...just in time, Ralph thought.

"Bye, Ralphie, we'll be seeing you," was the parting shot, as they walked off, a couple of them mimicking Ralph's rolling gait.

Sure enough, once in the cafeteria, they made fun of his lunch just like they used to do. One big boy, who was pretty much the school bully, walked past Ralph's table, and just happened to knock his lunch onto the floor.

"Oh, sorry, Ralphie," he said. "Guess your mama will have to make you a double-sized lunch tomorrow." They all laughed, waiting for Ralph to manipulate his bulk to the floor to pick up the remains of his lunch. Instead, Ralph stood up and shoved the bully.

"You knocked my lunch off the table, and you can just pick it up," Ralph said, wondering what had got into him.

Later, Ralph would tell his family you could have heard a pin drop in the cafeteria. It seemed like everything was in slow motion. Next thing he knew, the guy's fist was in Ralph's face, and he fell against the table, blood running from his nose. One of the cafeteria workers apparently called the principal's office and the fight ended as quickly as it had begun. Both boys were escorted from the room. Still, nobody had spoken; they were in a state of shock. Ralph Parsons had taken on the school bully!

That evening, Coach Keely dropped by the Parson home to check on Ralph. He told Pete, "I feel responsible for what happened today. Maybe I shouldn't have encouraged Ralph. I sure didn't see this coming."

"We're pretty upset over the incident," Pete replied, "but it's not your fault. You've helped Ralph gain a little self-confidence, and today he felt strong enough to stand up for himself. Don't think I'm in favor of fighting, and I've told Ralph the same thing, but I think this has been coming for a long time."

"Well, Mr. Parsons, I hope to see Ralph right back out on that track tomorrow. You can be sure I'll be there. Matter of fact, I think Ralph would be pretty pleased if you

showed up, too."

After the coach had left, Pete looked in on Martha. She had just about hit the ceiling when she got the call from school. But there she was, watching TV, now that she had calmed down. He went upstairs to Ralph's room, knocked on the half-open door as he always did, and entered the room. Ralph was sitting on the side of his bed, ice pack on his nose which, fortunately, was not broken.

" I don't want to talk about it any more, Dad."

"No problem, Son. I just wanted to tell you that Coach Keely dropped by to make sure you're OK. If it's alright with you, I may drop by tomorrow afternoon while you're doing your walk."

"Yeah, sure, if you want to." Ralph obviously had little to say, so his father told him goodnight, and went back downstairs.

Ralph put the ice pack on the floor and lay back on his bed. *Why had he done something so stupid?* He looked around his room, a room that was surprisingly neat for a thirteen-year-old
boy. He looked at his computer, the CD player, his TV on the bookcase. He nodded slightly - everything was in its place. Here, Ralph was in control. This was his haven, the one place where he was completely comfortable. How could he go back to school tomorrow? They'd be waiting for him, alright. Besides, his nose really was hurting. Ralph fell into a restless sleep.

He didn't go to school the next day, nor the next. His parents were beside themselves, trying to convince Ralph that he was not doing himself any good by staying away from school. Martha called the office and said he was sick, after which she did what she had always done when her little boy was sick: she fed him. And Ralph ate. He ate everything she put in front of him. The second day

that he stayed home, Nana came over.

"What do you hope to accomplish, Ralph?" she asked sternly.

"I just want everybody to leave me alone," was his sullen reply.

That night, Ralph had a dream. It was an old dream, one he hadn't had in a long time. In his dream, his mom had left him in a video store while she shopped in the mall. He got tired of standing around, physically tired, and began to feel dizzy. He thought if he could lean against the counter for

a few minutes, he'd be OK. But one of the guys who worked in the store told him to get off, because he was so fat he might break the counter. And everybody in the store laughed at him. They laughed and laughed until Ralph woke up, sweating and dizzy. *I know what I have to do, he said to himself.*

The next morning, he was ready when his dad left for work. Pete was relieved and the two of them chatted easily on the ride to school, just as though nothing had happened. Ralph walked purposefully to his locker, got his books, and went to class. He spoke to nobody and nobody spoke to him .*Fine, thought Ralph...you leave me alone and I'll do the same.* Later, as he walked past the guys in the cafeteria, he heard the bully make a remark half under his breath. He also heard a couple of the others tell him to shut up and leave Ralph alone. Opening his lunch bag, Ralph almost laughed when he saw that his mom was still trying to feed away his hurt. Well, that didn't mean he had to eat it all.

"Hey, Ralph, mind if I sit at your table for a minute?" He looked up in surprise. The voice belonged to Mary Sue, one of the really popular girls in school. Tongue-tied, he motioned for her to sit down.

"Glad to see you back, " she said. "Those cookies look good; may I have one?" Ralph smiled at that, and passed her the bag of cookies. Mary Sue took a bite of cookie and stood up to leave.

"Well, take care, you hear?" And she walked away, cookie bag in hand. Ralph had no time to figure out what had just happened because the bell rang and he had to clean up his lunch stuff and get to class.

Coach Keely wasn't around after school, but Ralph put on his walking shoes and started around the track. He had to take it really slow - a couple of days with no exercise made a difference. He thought about his dream as he walked. He didn't want to be that fat guy any more. For the first time, he began to see where this walking could lead. More exercise, eat right. It became his mantra as he walked and, at first, he didn't see the guys sitting on the bench watching him. There were three of them and Ralph was OK with that. *More exercise, eat right, he mumbled to himself.*

Later, he told Nana what he had been thinking about. "I need to do this, Nana," he said. "All of a sudden I'm tired of looking this way. I know I've lost some weight and I've got a long way to go. But, you know what, Nana? I'm ready to try."

And he did. The afternoon track walk became a group activity. Much to Coach Keely's surprise, several of the boys began to join Ralph and to call out encouragement. "Go, Ralph!" became the daily greeting. The same guys who formerly gave him such a hard time now passed him in the hall or met him at their lockers with, "Go, Ralph!" He finally persuaded his mom to let him try buying his lunch at school. He could get to the cafeteria right along with everyone else, but wasn't sure if he had lost enough weight to get through the lunch line. It was a tight squeeze, but somebody called out, "Go, Ralph!" and he made it. Ralph went to his usual table, but didn't feel as lonely as he had before. Besides, there was always the chance that Mary Sue would stop by to say hello.

Along with the coach, Ralph's family were his biggest cheerleaders. Nana and Pete could see Ralph's self-confidence growing day by day, and Martha was as proud of her son as any Mama Bear could be. She had quit urging more food on the boy and she let Ralph know she was on his team. Nana missed picking Ralph up at school once he started riding the bus, but he still came to her house most every afternoon.

Getting through the lunch line became easier for Ralph as time passed, and as the semester neared its close, he could occasionally be seen in actual conversation with one of the boys or girls who had either taunted or snubbed him. He got up the nerve to walk into his classes and take a regular seat instead of the larger one - and nobody said a word. Two or three of the boys who had been his worst tormentors even thrust their fists in the air in mute tribute. Once he felt himself a part of the class, Ralph was more inclined to speak up, and to volunteer answers, which pleased and surprised his teachers. He took it slowly, keeping up with his afternoon program. If he seemed too smart or too cocky, it would take only a word or two to totally shatter his fragile self-confidence.

Ralph still had one more thing to do, and he intended to do it on the following Saturday, when he and his dad went to the barbershop. The two barbers and the men who frequented the shop had

remarked on Ralph's weight loss and they had begun to kid him about how he'd have more girlfriends than he could handle, if he didn't watch out. *Good man talk, Ralph thought, and he was proud.* When Mr. Wilson picked up the broom and began to sweep around his chair, it was the moment

Ralph had been waiting for.

"Say, Mr Wilson, don't you need somebody to do that for you?" Ralph asked the barber.

"Yeah, Wilson," said one of the customers, "if you didn't spend so much time sweeping, we wouldn't have to spend so much time waiting." The others laughed at his joke.

Mr. Wilson gave Ralph a long, hard look. Finally, he said,"Well, Ralph, sounds like you're asking for a job. How old are you now?"

"Almost fourteen," replied Ralph, "and I could sweep up for you on Saturdays." He waited. Pete waited.

"We'll give it a try, son. You come in here Saturday morning, 9:00 sharp. And I'll talk to your dad here about what I can pay you."

"Yes, Sir, Mr. Wilson!" Ralph was elated. He had a job. He had a long way to go to get himself in good shape, but he knew he had made the right start. He was still the fat boy at school, but he didn't get teased nearly as much, and even the teasing was different - *not as mean, Ralph thought.* Maybe he could start running a little, and maybe by next semester, he'd be able to take part in P.E. classes. Best of all, he had some friends. He had the full support of his family, and that had taken some doing! Ralph Parsons would never forget what it felt like to be so fat he could hardly walk, so fat he couldn't even get on the bus, or go through the lunch line. Now, he could concentrate on being a new guy - a better guy.

I Am

Erin Christian

I weave worlds into being with threads of belief as delicate and beautiful as gossamer.

I am a ringleader of a circus, with the crowds clinging to my words with desperation akin to that of the last drops of morning dew on leaves before the sun that is that is their working lives burns away their happiness.

I wage wars with precision surpassing the finest generals, for as soon as I declare war and sound the drums of battle, I am known the victor.

I am a creator, birthing entire societies of people from the womb of my imagination. Bringing forth people who inspire in others love, hatred, joy, and despair and ending their lives when they have served a purpose.

I am a believer in truth and love and selflessness, but also in hatred and evil and vile human nature, for in order to have light there must also be darkness.

From my mind, to my heart, through my fingertips, to the pen bleeding its life upon parchment flows life and death and love and longing and hope and divinity and pain and sadness and mirth and mischief and most of all, understanding.

I am a daughter, a student, a lover, a dancer to the music that sounds from the Earth, I exist for the entertainment and emotional fulfillment of all others.

I am, because of all things human, a writer.

Breathe
Carmela Orsini

Just once:
Take a breath, now.
Inhale...before the plunge:
Stomach turning
Brow sweating
Eyes blinking
Hands shaking
Holding the inhale...
Stop breathing
Fear
Fear of the moment awaiting;
Exhale, exhale,
Exhale...
Relaxed.
I Do.

Disconnecting Houston

Clinton J. Droste

I awoke with the viscous air clinging to my lungs, the back of my throat was ablaze and my throat was smarting. My eyes remained closed, but somehow I was able to picture each breath, as I exhaled, condense to form small clouds of body heat that I was quickly losing. My hands were frozen, tightly clenched, my fists burned, and my nails were digging into my skin. I tried to sit up, but my bladder was so full that my kidneys ached. As I struggle to open my eyes, I could feel my eyelashes being ripped out by the crust that had glued them together. I tried to move my feet, but as I pushed them away from my body, I felt a lashing on my ankles. I was hog-tied.

I had managed to open my eyes, but the darkness was piercing. I struggled violently, back and forth, side to side, but it was no use. I tried to yell, but what cam out was more like a grunt. My nose sensed a familiar smell, but it was not so familiar as to remember right away what it was.

Why am I tied up, I wondered? Why is it so dark? How did I wake up here? Where is here?

"Hello!"

"Hey...Anybody?"

My body was uncontrollable. A thousand different thoughts ran through my head, and then I went out, unconscious, unaware, into a deep sleep that cradled me tightly; no dreams, no tossing, no turning, only darkness.

As I awoke for the second time, I was a little more receptive of my surroundings, though I had no idea how long I'd been asleep. The darkness still cramped the tiny quarters that I had been assigned, and I tried to feel around for anything that felt remotely familiar. Still, my arms and legs were bound, but now it felt more like a heavy weight upon my body. I could feel a strange sensation of dampness clinging to my back and shoulders, thick and sticky, like molasses. The odor was stronger now, and I was trying to make sense of it. I was so close to identifying it, but my mind was fighting the information that was

forcing its way through my nostrils. I could taste the staleness of blood in my mouth, but this was of little concern considering the seriousness of my situation.

"Hello?"

"Anybody...?"

"Heavenly Father, please forgive me for my sins Father, in Jesus name I pray. God...?"

"Help me...!"

I felt an evil spirit cloaking my numbness, my mind was astir, my heart was pounding, like an ancient drum lost in the midst and the flora of the jungle. At first, I though I was hearing thunder, but as the noise repeated itself, it became clear that I was hearing footsteps. As they neared, I went under again.

This time I felt cold hands grabbing and prodding, lifting and sweeping my lifelessness. I felt something scraping my chest like a razor slicing into my armor, and for the first time in days, I heard someone speaking. I tried to make out the words, but they were melded together, like a river, flowing over rocks. i wanted to respond, but I could not move. I saw the sun, bright and bold, flash and then disappear. Then I felt a pain that I could never forget, as though someone had their hand in my chest, moving and rearranging my insides like living room furniture. Slam, pull, push, tug, squeeze. I cried out, but my lips did not move.

Now, the voices seemed to be coming from more than one person, they pushed through the air, twisted and infused. I tried reaching out to grab the effluent noise, and then, nothing; no footsteps, no pain, no sun. In this silence I could sense the rotation of the earth. I imagined life going on as if I hadn't missed a day. I knew the moon would show its full face again, and somewhere someone was being born.

Suddenly, I plunged into a deep blue sea, my lungs filled with vascular lymph, and my weightlessness suspends my weariness. I think back to my childhood, but the memories are short, and encrypted; bits and pieces rush in, and then disappear. I see faces that I had forgotten, and I smell distinct aromas of places that I once visited. My body seizes and jerks forcefully and bursts

through the surface of the still water. I gasp strongly for air, and receive a huge dose to fill my lungs.

Someone is calling my name. I recognize the voice, this beautiful voice, it...it's my wife!

"Gloria...baby? I hear you. Gloria!"

Who is she talking to? I don't recognize the other voices. Why doesn't she hear me?

"I'm here. Can you hear me, Gloria?"

Why is she crying? What have these people done to her? I swear I'll kill the bastards if they hurt her. Then Gloria leans over me and I hear...

"Houston...wake up."

"Oh God, Houston. I can't live without you."

"Gloria, I'm right here. Please don't cry."

"I'm awake, look at me! I'm fine."

What is happening to me? Why does she not hear me? What kind of sadistic joke is this?

"Houston, please. I love you."

"Come on Mom, don't do this to yourself. We have to let him go. Dad can't hear you. The doctor said he doesn't even know we're here."

I Do

Sophie Hayle

Coveting the green ring
that gives away the impermanence
of the once gold band
you left by the sink,

I know better than to want
the passing promises you
once accepted;
the fate you sealed with a whispered
I do.

Baby on the way-
I can hear the screams to come
that you will silence with your
single voice
the only one left in that house.

I know better than to want
the struggles that will come
and the lines of too young and should have
people whisper in your dark.

Coveting your new title,
tacked on like a misplaced notion,
a new letter separating the
single syllable girl you once were.

Yes, I know better.
Yes, I covet still.
It's not the answer,
It's the question.

Insomnia

Erin Christian

When the eyes burn as fierce as hot coals and throb woefully in their sockets.

When the joints creak wearily and the skin pringles at each brush of cotton sheets as you thrash about in a battle for comfort.

When the thoughts of the mind race across days past, remembering all that was and all that could have been, as the deafening sound of crickets pounds in ears that long for sweet silence.

When the shadows of a darkened room dance and weave as spectres of the forgotten world touched by sunlight and yawns turn to sigh as the warmer, more welcoming world is longed for.

Puddles

Katherine Walker

The rain falls cold and gray. I huddle in a plush oversized chair inside a plush oversized bookstore sipping bitter coffee from a paper cup purchased at a sleek and shiny coffee shop tucked away amidst a maze of bookshelves. Serious-faced people inhabit the archipelago tables. One man squawks into his cell phone. Another hammers an electronic reply to an instant message on his laptop computer. A woman stares in feigned interest at her tablemate's discourse. It is a disjointed pantomime of intimacy. I turn my back on them and face the horde.

Bodies ebb and flow in a living ocean. Wave after wave of people wash through the doors, spilling across the bookstore and flooding into the cavernous mall behind. Weekend shoppers: herds of angst-ridden teenagers seeking sanctuary from parental eyes, preoccupied parents dragging ill-tempered children by the hand like dogs on leashes, couples flaunting like peacocks to see and be seen. Everyone with somewhere to be and something to do, scurrying to and fro with a misplaced sense of urgency, their arid faces seeing without sensing the vacuous earnestness in which they exist.

I sit on my little island beyond the tide with a book in my lap. The familiar new book smell wafts over me in a chorus of virgin paper and glue. However, my mind is too numb to crack its hardbound shell, too dull to decipher the words printed across its pages. So instead, I stare through the rain-streaked window. Cars circle the parking lot beyond like vultures until they find that one perfect parking place. More people spew forth, running across the asphalt towards the sheltering doorway.

Why do people run in the rain as if a few more drops of water or a few less footsteps make such a difference? It is really a fear of getting wet? Or could it be something deeper, some hidden reflection we choose not to recall of days when time was all we had; a child's memory of watching a puddle form drop by drop until the entire world has melted into that mirror pool and time only exists as the tinkling heartbeat cadence of drip ...plop...drip?

I ask myself but I have no answer.

Cell Phone Man grates his chair against the tile. I turn to view the little tableau and find it very much the same: Computer Man still types away, Aloof Woman is now the one regaling her friend with some anecdote while the friend sits in detached attentiveness. Cell Phone Man gathers his newspapers and rises,

phone still in ear, and walks away from the remains of a small latte and half-eaten danish. As he crosses the store, he bumps into my chair.

"Sorry," he mutters as he turns only a fraction in my direction. His self-important scowl seems to say I shouldn't have been in his way. I watch him sidestep through the door as a woman carrying a child in tow tries to navigate the narrow entrance. Cell Phone Man pauses at the curb and glares into the sky, willing the sky to cease for him alone. The rain falls unimpressed. He holds the newspaper and holds it over his head as he dashes to the dry safety of his car.

A splash of color catches my eye. Amid the vast sea of somber hues, a small red umbrella bobs like a wind-filled sail in the hand of a little girl. Her other hand is enmeshed with her father's, pulling him slowly across the parking lot in a zigzag path. She stops to inspect each puddle she comes to only a moment before taking a great leap into its center sending the water up in shimmering sprays. Her impish face dances with laughter. The eyes of her father reflect the little girls amusement. When they near the curb, she closes her umbrella and, taking both of her father's hands, leaps once more as he lifts her in momentary flight before alighting a few steps from the door. They enter the store and the man wipes the rain from his face with his free hand. His neatly ironed slacks are soaked from the knees down because of the little girl's romp. As the pair walks further into the bookstore, the man catches my watching eyes and smiles. I realize it is in response to my own.

I rise from my island and navigate through the horde to the checkout counter. A woman whose weary eyes belie the painted-on smile so carefully applied at the start of her shift scans my book and places it into a plastic bag with practiced efficiency. I hand her some cash and she hands me a receipt with my change.

"Thank-you-come-again-I-can-help-the-next-person-in-line-please?" she rattles off as a man in line behind me is already inching his way forward.

"Thank you. Have a wonderful day," I reply with a smile. The painted-on smile falters a bit as the clerk's face registers mild shock at the interruption of her routine.

"Thank you," she repeats slowly before turning to the impatient man before her. Her eyes seem just a little less weary.

I step outside and raise my face to the sky. The first kisses of raindrops on my face are cool and fresh. I unfurl my own sail and swing it wide to the gentle breeze. Stepping from the curb onto the water-slicked asphalt, I sail off to seek a puddle of my own. The world melts away while all around me the rain falls.

Until

Valeri Moore

In seclusion I drop the mask I hide behind.
On my knees I pray.
I give up my confessions of what I did wrong,
    until my
    throat aches
    my stomach is empty
    and tears have cooled my burning cheeks.
I pray until I
Feel deserving again,
    until I can look at myself in the mirror.
Still I shiver.
Trying to push the memories of my confession away,
I pick up my mask.
    returning to the role i play
    I step back into my life,
    wipe the tears from my eyes.
    Surrounded by familiar faces
    I play my part just right;
    Laughing,
    Smiling,
    I hide my pain
    all the while convincing myself
    when I am good enough,
Then I will be me.

Safety and Comfort Guide

Karen Harrell

The woman has been sitting in my section for over an hour now. I've properly refilled her coffee cup four times, making sure she is well stocked with coffee whitener every time I stop by her table. Of course, it isn't real half-and-half; this isn't that kind of place. We specialize in comfort food, comfort food she doesn't seem to be interested in. When she first sat down, I listed the specials: meatloaf and mashed potatoes or fried catfish and green beans. She didn't even look at me while she declined to order. She barely croaked out "I'm waiting for someone to meet me."

Since then, the mound of creamer has grown to enormous proportions beside her cup; she only uses one per full cup of coffee, but doesn't take sugar. It's like some sort of mathematical equation; it's policy to bring at least three creamers, so she has eight left over from the twelve I've brought her so far. Every time I refill her cup, she pours in her one creamer and spends at least two minutes stirring it in, while she stares blankly at the tablecloth. After she is done stirring, she looks over at her mute mobile phone, as if she has missed a call. It isn't very loud in here today; Wednesdays at 3 p.m. rarely are. This is why I've had time to refill her coffee and stare at her from behind the drink station. I don't think she's noticed, yet.

She isn't the type of woman I usually go after, but I can see a hint of attractiveness about her, hidden behind her nervousness. She's not overly well dressed for an office atmosphere, but in this land of jeans and T-shirts, she is dressed to the nines. She has on a grayish purplish pair of pants with a dark purple blouse. Her jacket, which matches the pants, is draped carefully on the back of her chair. Her dark brown hair is in a severe bun, and I can see strands of red that seem natural, not out of a bottle. Her makeup is minimal, as far as I can tell, just a bit of eyeliner and shadow. I can see her freckles peaking out from behind light foundation, and her skin is pale beneath the little bit that she is wearing. She looks like she may be between 25 and 35: the age range that guys like me can never read. I always end up on the opposite end of the scale in that range when I try to guess a woman's age. I used to work in the midway at carnivals, guessing ages

and weights. One girl cried because I guessed she was 32 when she was really 26. Another beamed when I guessed 25; she turned out to be damn near 40. I didn't keep that job long.

I just refilled her cup again; this time she looked toward me. She didn't really look at me, more at my hands filling the cup. When I asked if she was ready to order, she actually spoke in a relatively louder tone, but still didn't want food. I'm back at the drink station, watching her stir the cup for minute two. I think she's being stood up, but I'm not sure. She seems so anxious, like she doesn't want to meet whoever is coming. I think this last cup of coffee has kicked in because she keeps eyeing the door like she thinks any minute now, here comes my guy. I can't imagine she's here for a date; who the hell takes a woman out to a country restaurant on a Wednesday before 5 p.m.?

While I watch her, I start to imagine what she does all day. I think she is a teaching assistant at the local college. I haven't seen her around, but she seems the right age, and her suit isn't good enough for her to be a full-fledged professor. It looks like she is comfortable in it and that she has owned it for more than a year or two. I see a couple of patches that are worn on the jacket's elbows; I bet she leans on them a lot. She has a dab of chalk dust on the cuff of her blouse, pee yellow against that dark purple. I saw that the last time I filled the cup. She can't be a high school teacher or middle school, they don't let out until 4 p.m., and it isn't quite 3:30 yet. Plus, she came in around 2; I remember because I had just finished rolling silverware for the dinner rush.

She just took a book out of a hidden inner pocket from her jacket. It looks slender, like a date book. Maybe she is a businesswoman, but I can't figure where from in this town; we don't have an over abundance of corporations. She could be from the city, but why would she drive all the way here to not eat food? She can get coffee in one of those chain places that specialize in strong coffee at a strong price. Instead, she is sitting here drinking our crappy brew.

I've come to hate the guy she is waiting for. At this point, I know it is definitely a guy; she is just too jumpy for it to be a long lost twin or a girlfriend from high school. She doesn't have a purse with her, so I don't think it's a date. Girls always seem to bring purses on dates, so they can touch up their lips or just look girlier. I like women

who leave the damn things at home. Anything they need, they should be able to carry in their pockets. If they don't have pockets, then they are too fancy for me. She isn't wearing lipstick, so she doesn't need to touch it up. Everything else is in her bottomless jacket pockets. I think I love her for that.

A man just walked in. She looks quickly at the door, but it isn't her man, he just wants to use the john. I notice she still hasn't started on this fifth cup, so I am still behind the drink station, fiddling with the pitchers, wiping the counter over and over.

When I get lonely, I start to read the warning labels around my apartment. One of my favorites is on my computer keyboard. It says, "To reduce risk of serious injury to hands, wrists or other joints, read Safety & Comfort Guide." Funny thing is that the keyboard didn't come with a guide; I got it in the mall when my old one went on the fritz. That always makes me chuckle; so many things should come with a Safety & Comfort Guide. I wish I could write one for this lady; she is the furthest from safe and comfortable that I've seen in a long time. She reminds me a bit of the woman who ran the funnel cake stand at the carnival I worked for. Both of them have nails bitten to the quick. Both of them drink coffees like crazy. I mean, really, five cups in just over an hour. No wonder she's so jumpy.

Whoa, her man is here. He just sat down and looks peeved as can be. I think she is his mistress and he didn't want to meet her near where they live. He's older than she is; he looks about 45 and is wearing an old suit, with stupid patches on the elbows. He has really dark hair with lots of gray strands and is unloading a leather satchel. Boy oh boy, he just keeps piling books on the table; they all look dusty.

I just got him a coffee. What a dick, he barely grunted at me. Neither of them want food, and my girl refuses to look up from the coffee cup now. He keeps acting like her father; he's red in the face and keeps talking at her, down to her. She has a little color now, a blush in her cheeks like she is ashamed. I'd like to shame him, making her wait that long. I think I'll spit in his coffee cup, a nice fresh cup of phlegm for his creamer.

I gave him his coffee and he didn't even thank me. Hell, he didn't even acknowledge my presence. He is definitely pissed about something; she's crying now, silently. I wanted so badly to ask her if she needs help, but

she won't look up from her cup at all. I bet he beats her, shakes her like a doll and throws her around the hotel room before he takes her. I can see him doing that, grasping her turned in shoulders and just shaking her until her teeth rattle. Or, maybe he just yells at her while she cowers on the bed, wearing whatever skimpy thing her throws her way. I bet his wife is fat and wears too much makeup. I bet she carries a purse.

Now he's calming down. He just grabbed her hand and is talking softly to her. They are leaning into each other, like they are at some romantic bistro instead of a greasy spoon. He's like the side show barker I had to beat up the summer I was at the carnival. He wouldn't stop yelling at the nervous funnel cake girl. That's what finally lost me my job, that and the fact I couldn't guess ages worth a shit. I can't stand a man who yells for no reason, especially at a woman. I mean, what the hell is this guy thinking, yelling at her in public, making her cry? I bet he's bad in bed and she only stays with him because she is lonely, like me, like that funnel cake girl was. I could save her from him. I wanted to save the carny girl, but she had never known anything better. This girl must have had at least one decent guy in her life.

He's kissing her hand now. What a shithead, buttering her up. I bet he's whispering crap like "I don't mean to get so mad, but you need to read all of these books if you want me to pump you full of my married guy jizz once a week." I may not be able to guess ages, but I know what lurks in the mind of a dirty old man. She deserves better. I think I'll bring her some pie.

Ha! Old married guy didn't like that one bit. He started fuming as soon as I walked up with the pie, just a big old piece of apple pie with extra ice cream on the side. She looks like she needs to fatten up a bit; I've never met a girl who eats pie and takes shit from some dude. I can save her with pie; she's eating it and looked over at me smiling. Now I know I love her, for sure. He keeps glaring at me; I didn't bring him crap. Maybe I should bring him just that, a pile of steaming crap on a plate, make him eat shit instead of her.

My boss made me step outside for a smoke; he could see me getting mad at the guy with my girl. He smoothed it over while I was gone and he wants me to apologize. Screw that; instead, I walked right up to the married asshole and popped him one in the jaw. I guess

that was a mistake; my girl started bawling and screaming "Why'd you hit my dad?" Shit, guess I don't guess anything right anymore. It's like at the carnival, when I hit that barker. I almost went to jail over that, but the carnival owner got me out of the jam, as long as I promised not to ever show up again. No problem there, I hate carnivals.

Now the girl has calmed down a bit. I'm just standing here looking at her, waiting for her dad to get up. Finally she looks at me.

"Why'd you hit my dad?"

I explain to her all about thinking he was her lover and that I wanted to save her from him. I explain about the funnel cake girl and the barker. I explain about how I can take her away from here and start fresh, maybe in the city. I explain how I love her and I will always take care of her. She just looks at me, big brown eyes brimming with tears, but a small smile starting at the corner of her mouth. The whole time her dad is still cold clocked on the floor and my boss is just screaming at me.

"What's your name?"

I tell her my name is Lex, short for Lexington. I tell her about how my mom was a history buff and really dug the battle of Lexington. She just laughs softly, so I keep talking about how my mom died and my dad still lives in a little house in town. I tell her I finished school, my mom never raised a moron. I tell her that she doesn't need all those dusty books to live, just the world in all its glory. Her dad is starting to come around, so I start shaking, waiting for the inevitable return punch, or lawsuit, one or the other.

Then my boss taps my shoulder and I'm back behind the drink station, rolling silverware. I guess I blanked out for a while there because the girl has just walked in and sat down. This time she's smiling; she's wearing her hair down and free. She looks over at me and winks. This time, she orders a big slice of apple pie and a cup of coffee. She looks in my eyes instead of at my hands. She smiles at me and says "Thank you." She's the funnel cake girl, all grown up, not needing me anymore. She eats her pie and drinks her cup of coffee, this time with two creamers instead of one. Then she grabs her purse and her check and heads out of my life forever.

Rebellious Child

Tyeshia Redden

I sit with lyrical devices in hand, desperately trying to
salvage the image I maintain Yet these so-called skills
cannot subdue the emotions my mind seeks to contain
Suddenly and abruptly hurt by the most unexpected
Thrown out into the cold, like the wandering soldier that
has defected
A longing to understand coupled with the shackles of one
who loves too much
Told that harsh decisions are made only for my good, only
out of love and such
And the mind-blowing realization of one who does not love
at all
Why I have been given these gifts only to squander them
To have others misconstrue my meanings and create
another problem
Denied my birthright under the pretense of love
Yet, she relit my flame, my true mother, the one from
above
In solitude, I endure the struggles that you carelessly
dismiss
Listening to the unfounded blasphemies that pour from
your lips
However, that was when I was young...
You cannot comprehend the sheer terror I feel at becoming
you
But I was never meant to be on your level or follow your
every cue
Even now, you are trading subtle deceptions for blatant
lies
I see the bleak torture in store, for the windows to the
soul, truly are your eyes
Your ceaseless babble is only the beginning to your own
ether
The unspoken now being said, off any scale, cannot be
handled by any meter
Now I have found that lyrical devices are not needed to
soothe this beast
Only through my turmoil will I ever find my peace
I only need my goddess-given words to truly express my

desires
You have only felt the heat; you are not ready for the flames of my fires
I know your game, seen through your attempts at reconciliation
I need you about as much as I crave anthrax in my inhalation In this never-ending struggle for every inch of satisfaction, I must first battle a mile
Unknowing, not seeing, deaf, dumb, and blind to the plight, to the passion of this rebellious child

Irrational

Carmela Orsini

Oh no, not again.
Wait a minute; be my friend.
I need you here; I need you now;
I need your help; I don't know how.
I'm free falling, falling hard:
So deal me in – give me good cards.
And if you do, I'll know you tried,
But if you don't, I know you lied.
Sorry again, I know I'm wrong.
What has kept you my friend so long?
I don't mean to be so harsh, so mean;
I'm so self-destructive, it seems.
So here we are to the final though,
For I am one not to be bought:
Are you strong, can you handle me?
Are you tough enough to be
My friend?

Oh no, not again.
Wait a minute; be my friend!

Ocean
Ditrie Sanchez

the ocean swell
is at just the right angle
to make you want to jump overboard,
and the sun's rays are pinging
off any bit of metal to be found
like madmen in search of a memory.
you don't really know
that salt can sting
until it slaps you in the face
like a performing seal
out of a Calder stabile
and once it does you wonder
does the sodium do it
or the chloride,
but then there's a whap
and you decide it's worthless
pain is pain, chemical or no.
on the starboard side
a slip of skin wafts about
sliding in and out of the water
it's embarrassing, really-
it has no boundaries.
but the tourists love to watch it
so you bring them here
to this indecent place
where the dolphins seduce
children's virginal hands.
it's a time of discovery.
i wash my hands
then turn the wheel.
that's enough for today...

I Sing a Song of Change

David Bailey

Saturday night is a strange beast. I sit in an easy chair while reading some winded writer rant on about walking in wooded areas. The television sits in front of me blaring a badly written skit program featuring untalented actors. The night is cold. A blanket sits comfortably around my shoulders giving me a strange feeling of immersion in some strange womb. What is most frightening about this is that I am enjoying it!

I enjoy the cold because it gives me an excuse to bundle up and bathe myself in a false sense of snug security. I love the idiotic rambling of the television because it fills the silence and blinds me to the fact that I'm alone. The piece of literature I have been scanning for 2 hours drones on and on lulling me into a slow quiet stupor. I nod my head and my thoughts scatter like a thousand insects on caffeine skittering about in every direction. Then they slowly dissolve into nothingness.

Then I see her. She stands before me motionless. She stares off into a distance, searching, scanning, and waiting. After a few excruciating seconds her eyes turn to me. She stares at me blankly and expressionless. Her gaze is comforting and soothing. There was a time when I prayed every night just to look into her eyes. Then I realize she is not looking at me. She is looking straight through me.

Then it starts. An echo of a song attempted long ago begins to play through my head. It is a refrain meant to praise and profess concealed feelings of love, but instead erupted into the world a weak, pathetic whimper that I try desperately to forget. It is a bastard child I dare not claim. No matter how much I run, it always finds me.

With a sudden lurch I'm pulled from my pathetic stupor. The book falls to the floor with the intensity of a brick on glass. The dialogue from the awful television program now pounds like a megaphone propped up near my ear. I shiver and feel the sensation of cold withered hands scraping down my back. The memory of that song has once again ruined a perfect evening.

What woman could cause such pain and despair? What song could possibly be that bad? One probably thinks of cheesy dime-store romance novels. Maybe she

was my first love and time gradually separated us. Maybe it was an unrequited obsession that tangled my mind into ugly knots like a rope fed through the spokes of bicycle. Maybe the song was ours and her absence has made it a forbidden taboo because it reminds me of her. The truth is that it's much simpler and embarrassing.

Her name was Elizabeth, and I think I loved her. I had watched her from a distance for about three months trying to muster the courage to say something. It's an old story that's been retold more then "Romeo and Juliet". Immature male struggles to overcome the fear of actually conversing with a member of the opposite sex. Girls are bug zappers to thirteen-year-old boys. We buzz around them, fixated in their all-encompassing glow; yet we keep our distance because we know the moment we touch we fry our brains and fall lifeless to the ground charred, black, and shriveled.

After a couple of months I gave up. She was a couple of baseball fields out of my league. I turned my mind to more important things like card games, CD's and band class. Than one monumental Saturday night my friends and I attended a concert. The music was so loud any attempt at conversation turned into a screaming match. The lead singer wailed like a bat. He thrashed around the stage with the overabundant energy so often associated with a child that desperately needs Ritalin. This was the Hell that brought me face to face with her.

I had just finished telling myself that there was no way this night could yield anything good or redeemable. I turned to leave and God answered the prayer I had abandoned. I was face to face with her. For the first time I gazed directly into her eyes. I no longer perceived the presence of the ground. I felt light and weightless. The experience was remarkably similar to huffing aerosol. She was so beautiful to me. All I wanted to do was tell her how lovely she was. I wanted to fashion my words into poetry for her. I wanted to woo her with a true song of love and affection.

Her mind numbing beauty dulled not only my senses but my words as well, "You...you're...uh...you're so beautiful. You're just so beautiful." My voice thundered through with the power of a cricket's chirp. The song I wished to sing for her had escaped my lips as a detestable mutation no better then the piercing screams of the heavy metal singer. My stomach seared with tumultuous agony as a single thought repeated through my mind like a morbid metronome, "You Idiot! You Idiot! You Idiot!" She just stood there and stared blankly like one would look at a rock or a wall. I walked away and sat in the parking lot for the remaining hour of the concert. The stars were lovely that night.

We never actually spoke again at any length. I would see her floating by like a ghost in the halls not even noting my presence. There were instances where those eyes would turn to me, but instead of feeling weightless

and giddy I would feel anchored. I would usually stare down to the ground hanging my head in shame with the horrid mockery of a song echoing through my head. Those weak words backed up by the screaming of a talentless psycho haunt me still to this day.

I should never have given up on her. Looking back I say to myself that every teenage boy makes a complete moron out of himself on a regular basis. There is no possible way this girl nursed feelings of bitter hatred and angst simply because my first words to her were more than a little awkward. In reality, she may have been somewhat flattered. She was probably confused, but definitely flattered. I turned away from her and ran because I was embarrassed by one little botched attempt at a song. I would rather have forgotten that moment completely than continue pursuing something meaningful with her. The truth is you cannot run; you can never forget. It was bound to happen again anyway.

And it did happen again. This is not the only song that echoes through my head and ruins an otherwise good day. This one usually surfaces while I'm driving to work in the morning. I'll be singing to a laughable sixties song about love and revolution. My voice rings within my head and seems to match beautifully to the music like I'm some undiscovered protégé. I imagine myself on stage performing to an eager audience showering me with affection. It takes no effort. The music flows naturally from me and I feel like a god. I laugh at my confidence, knowing how terrible I really must sound.

Once again a melody begins to play in the distant corners of my memory. It is high pitched, off key, and simply awful. Once again it's the sound of my own voice. I try to put it out of my memory and think of other things, but its too late. It breaks out from the confines of my subconscious and dominates my thoughts. I try to turn away but it grows cancer like until there is no direction to look without staring directly into it. I let off the gas and begin to coast slower and slower. A short distance behind me a horn screams and I imagine the curses and obscenities shouted by the driver. I wish I could hear them. Anything would be better than this damn song from a time I wish I could forget.

This is how the song was sung. I was at a party standing alone in a corner sipping on some disgusting punch with a strange burning taste and an odor that reminded me of carburetor cleaner. I couldn't seem to break through the social barriers that separated me from the females. So I just stood in quiet desperation trying to give the appearance of having a good time. I stood with my arms folded in front of me bouncing to whatever song came over the speakers. I probably looked like a chaperone. An effeminate Latin American pop star burst from the speakers singing of finding that one true love, giving agonizing commentary to my present situation. The scene was

saturated in irony and perverse humor. I really liked the song, and I'm pretty sure the punch was spiked. I began to quietly sing along with the lyrics confidant in the vastness of my social isolation. I didn't realize how loud I was.

I remember their eyes, all turning and staring at me like I had committed some vile crime. To be realistic I had just practically raped the song. An agonizing silence passed over the room as the song came to an end. It was like the long quiet pause just before someone is executed in a guillotine. A young girl approached me. She was mildly attractive and my slightly inebriated logic had as of yet failed to understand the true extent of my foolishness.

"Hey," I said with a slight tinge of self-congratulation. I thought I had succeeded in finally attracting one.

"Hey, do you know who sings this song?" Her voice was like a harp, quick yet with a lasting resonance.

"Huh huh, Yeah I think his name is Valero or something Spanishy like that", I'm sure she could smell the sour fire of alcohol on my breath.

"Why don't you let *him* sing it then?"

Five minutes later I was stumbling out the door into the all too familiar cold of the night. I remember standing there dumbfounded trying desperately to understand what had happened. Thought itself was challenging for me at this point considering the amount of tainted punch I had consumed standing alone in the corner. I breathed deeply and slowly while gradually lowering myself into a sitting position on the ground. I held my head in my hands fighting tears. Eventually I looked up and gazed upon my old friends, my true friends. The stars were once again incredibly lovely.

Both of these memories are songs that erupted from me. They were poorly developed and embarrassing, but that is not why they haunt me. They torture and plague me because I gave them life and substance, then, like a coward, I ran away from them. I refused to address and accept them. All I wanted was to deny and forget their existence but they lay away hidden within the darkest corners of my mind. It's like a bad sore hanging around an obscure corner of the mouth. One minute a poor sap is enjoying a nice slice of pizza, and then he only grazes it with a miniscule crumb. His mind splits in two and the succulent taste of pizza fades away to searing agony. Then he worries, "when will I hit it again? I will hit it again; it's only a matter of time."

They hold me hostage. These memories hide within me waiting to spring forth like predators stalking prey. They wait for that moment when I least expect, the one moment their existence has escaped me and I float in a pool of idle bliss. They wait for me to get nice and relaxed before they blow me to hell.

After years of contemplating these malicious enigmas prowling my mind, I may have finally started to truly understand them. They are like splinters. They hurt when

they first pierce the skin but once they have lodged the pain dulls away and only returns when you accidentally bump the area of the wound. The most painful thing to attempt at this point is removal. Leaving the splinter in the skin will only cause further damage later. Eventually a time will come when one must face this buried agony and remove it from the system entirely, even if it requires tearing away the layers of skin that have grown over it.

But these are not splinters, they are memories. We can never forget and so we cannot fully alienate ourselves from the experience of pain. We incorporate it into ourselves. It becomes an integral part of our personal identity. Through experience we form our personal boundaries and learn from mistakes. What we learn from these experiences constitutes the layers of skin that grow over the splinter. The wound has been repaired and we learn to avoid the situation that lodged the splinter in the first place, yet the initial pain and embarrassment still remains. For every pearly attribute we brag about, a grain of sand rests in the center. I never sang at another party, and I always check the punch before I guzzle it. I never stuttered before a woman again and I actually pride myself in my sociability with them. Why do these experiences still cause me so much misery? Even after I have learned and grown from them they return to torment me.

I'm sick of it. I'm twenty-one. I have been attending college for almost four years. My grades are good, I'm relatively healthy and my hair is terrific. I try as hard as I can and I live my life to the best of my ability. At the center of this vain impetuous youth lies a broken child crying over wounds that won't heal. Worst of all these experiences aren't even all that traumatic. There are people in the world who weep over the loss of loved ones, hunger, and war. I sit alone on Saturday night and grieve over a few social faux pas. I desperately need to get my priorities straight.

The human mind is very complicated and mysterious. They only real way to try to understand its mechanics is to use abstract terms and rely on metaphor. So, human memory seems to be formed like one would order from a very large buffet. The food is constantly changing and we select specific items that are suited to our taste among the overabundance. We are continuously bombarded by a menagerie of experiences and events. On a subconscious level, our minds pick and choose from the overcrowded buffet of meaningless experiences and construct collages that form the most pertinent and sacred experiences to us. Since the process is subconscious (when was the last time you really chose to hold onto a memory for the rest of your life?) then the mind is acting on its own beyond any real control from the person. That means one thing. These painful memories are there for a purpose. Now after years of suffering and running from these songs of dreaded experience I finally stand ready to face and understand

them.

I will never understand myself during those times. I was a sad, strange little child that had so much trouble just facing a challenge head on. Any time a complication or problem faced me I turned tail and ran. These failures only a few among many, tormented me so much that I couldn't bear exist in that primordial weakness. My cowardice and laughable, bumbling, innocence was a flaw that threatened to destroy me. What could I do?

I grew up. I stopped running from my problems. I intentionally threw myself in awkward social situations to overcome my fear of women and confrontation. I experimented with several forms of alcohol in safe situations so I could learn the taste and know my boundaries. I knew what my problems were and I did my best to fix them. For the first time I can stand up and say I like myself.

The self is a being that must experience challenges and trials in order to develop and grow. The mind is just like the body. The muscles must be stretched, torn and worked to grow and strengthen. Likewise, the mind and the soul must face the pressures and strains of life to become toned and strong. Without these embarrassing moments and the opportunity to overcome them, the mind and soul will atrophy.

I don't think I will ever like the kid who screwed up so much when he was young, but he is owed a high degree of respect. He may have runaway from everything at first, but he did work to make sure these situations did not repeat themselves. He owned up to his flaws and worked to change and grow. He is my progenitor. Without him and his suffering I could have never existed.

So from the ruins of two disastrous songs a new melody springs. It is a bit shaky and uncertain, but proud of its existence. It is a song of change. I sing for myself and any that wish to listen. Now, when those phantoms, images and botched melodies come to haunt and torment me I will not simply run from them. I will welcome and entertain them. I will be thankful for the opportunity to review and explore the self that has grown. Socrates himself stated, "The unexamined life is not worth living."

You
Hilary Wanes

I miss you,
but then again,
I miss me.

The parts of me
that came from you,
that used to remind me
of me.

Body and Mind, Heart and Soul

Sheryl Avery

As I left the building and waved good-bye to groups of people
I see you running, hiding and tagging
The service was no bore, it has taught you to be kind and forgiving
And so you're happy, I see your mind is free
You're playing
Later I sat huddled on a cold bench in the park
The wind blew silently and frigidly, a dog barked
Still I see you laughing, swinging and sliding
And so you're happy, I'm sure your heart is pure
You're playing
As I sat on the bathroom floor, a pool from your
Bath water surrounding me, yet still I sat if need be
I see you among tons of bubbles, splashing yet smiling
And so you're happy, I've seen your body is clean
You're playing
I smiled lovingly as I tucked you in bed and dimmed the light
I see you praying and yawning as you sleepily uttered goodnight
As you lay between the covers, your eyes are closed,
A soft smile on your lips, you seem to be asleep
And so you're happy, I'm pleased your soul is at peace
You're sleeping

It's My Body; I Can Do Whatever I Want!

Jessica Martinez

I worked all day to come home to the news—
protesters protesting the Anti-abortion protesters
and a picture of a young woman
whose jeans were slung low below her belly.
She had drawn a picture on her lower abdomen
with thick, red marker—a uterus, fallopian tubes and
ovaries.
Inside her symbolic uterus, a word was written: MINE.
I laughed—and if I had been present at the protest,
I would have politely tapped her on the shoulder
to inform her that while her uterus might belong to her,
apparently, other organs of her female anatomy do not;
after all, *prostitution* is still illegal in the United States.

Foundation
Chris Dunn

How to explain this feeling, this terrible sickness.
My heart aches and my stomach churns.
Oh, to have my feet on solid ground,
to truly know, to be whole.
All things appear as but distractions to me now.
The boulder's I so pained to move into place,
all that I valued as solid has crumbled into nonsense.
What I once held as indestructible, what supported me for so long,
has vanished without a trace.
I went to clasp it, but it brushed aside as a silken spider's web.
This must not be it, I thought.
It was here, I swear it.
I will search it out, and it will comfort me once again.
How sturdy, how predictable, how often I could count on it.
This must be a nightmare.
Wake me up, O God!
I search and I search,
I long and I long.
What exists which is solid, what exists which is true?
This nausea has consumed me, death seems sweet in its wake.
How, how can what was no longer be?

I've known joy.
A warm blanket, a presence so sweet.
An all consuming glow, pouring out of my heart, my mind, my fingers.
All despair, all heartache, washed away in a glistening light.
Waterfall of perfection, pouring, being, filling my soul.
Unable to contain it, too much goodness.
My heart becomes too big, I must explode.
My love rips down the gates of hell,
pervades all semblance of meaning,
falls the mighty, anchors the weak,
the world spins on its axis,
the depths proclaim its greatness,
all being proclaims its worth.
Death, life, one and the same.

Bleakness now.
Where a river once flowed, now is parched and desert.
To do what is right, to find what is true.
What vanity to try?
Blackness and death, the only friends I can count on.

Spirit -In Memory of Dr. Jill Miller

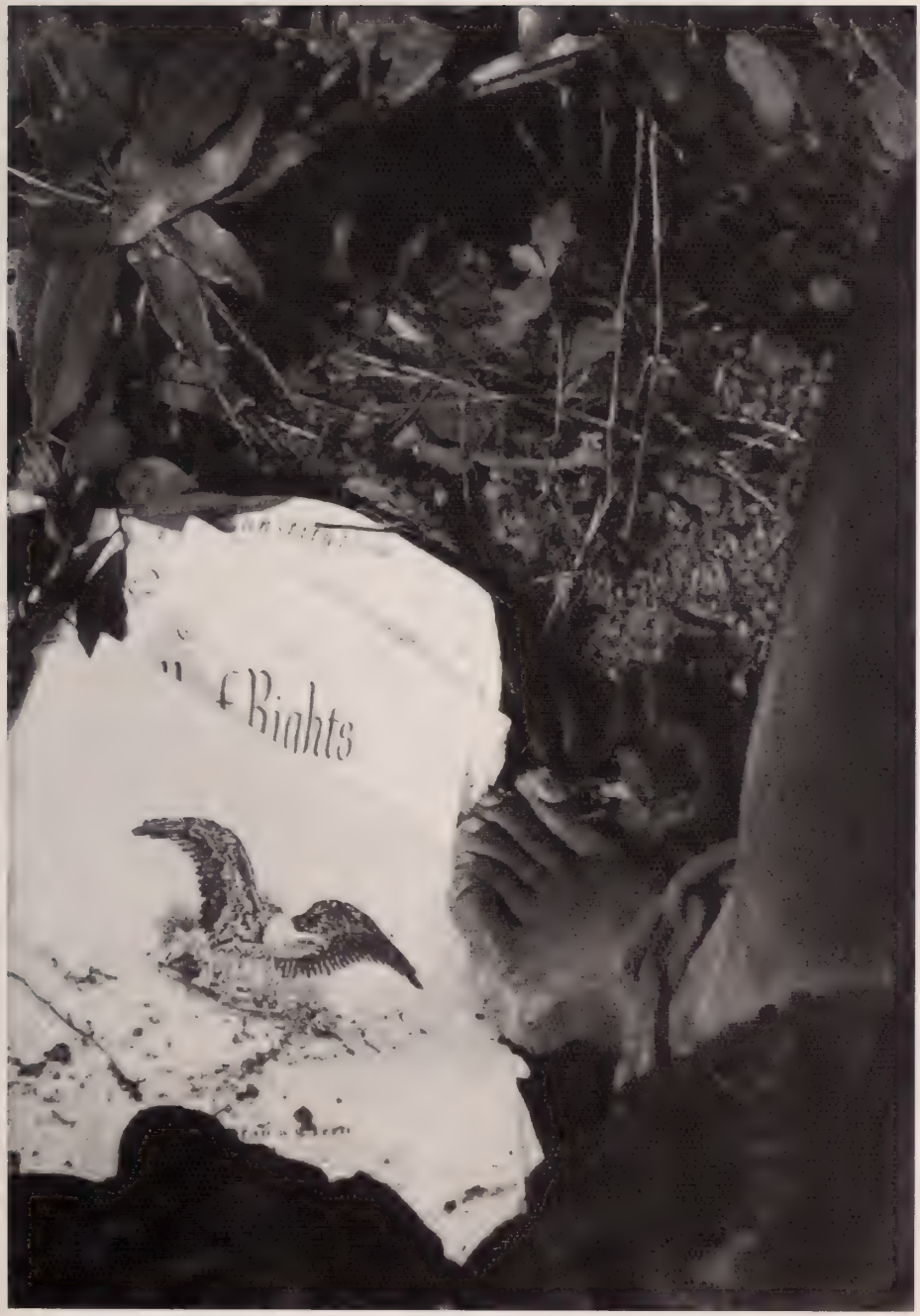
Julian Santa-Rita

Hideaway

Colin Stark

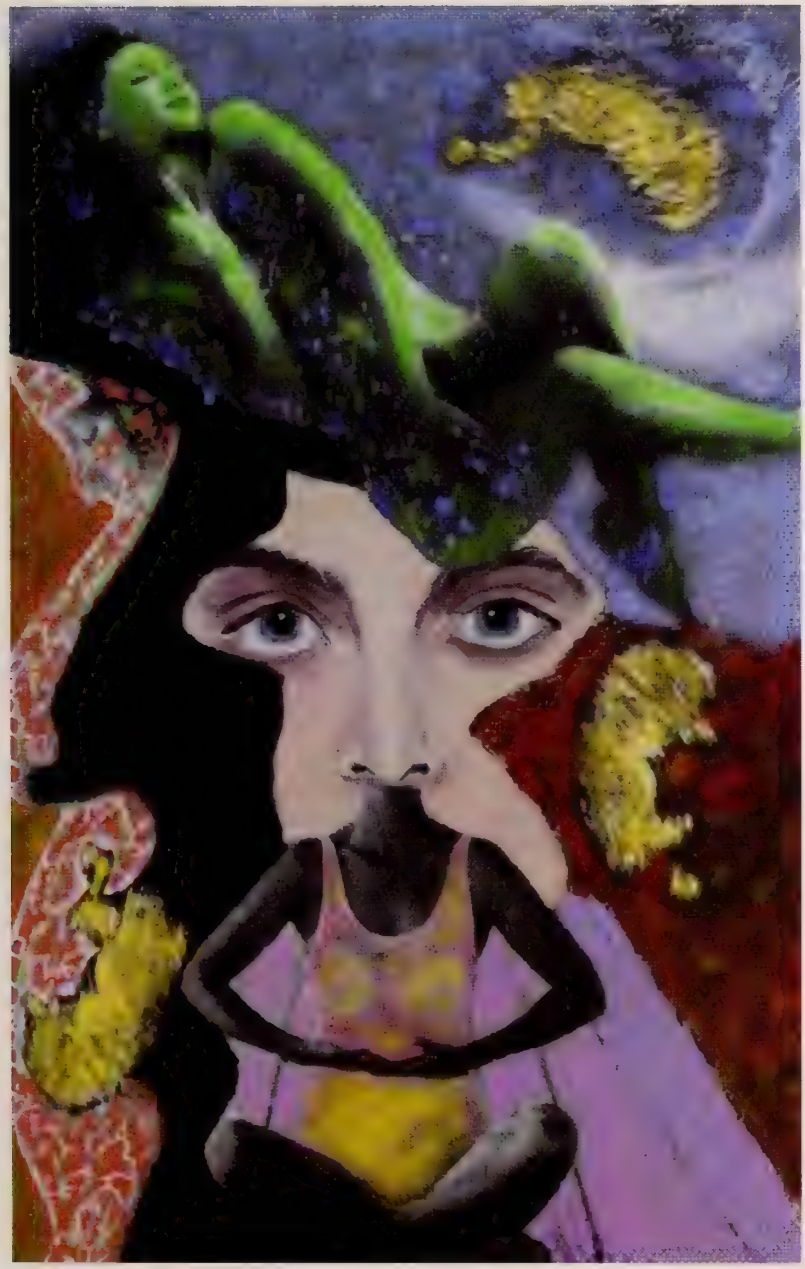
Dock

Firey Night
Megan Starn



Freedom
Jamie Hubbard

Blue Read



Within Me
Amy Kidane

Van Gogh's Marsh

Spring
Megan Stern

Untitled

Attitude

Jennifer Turpin Durden

Roll Call

2006

CALLIOPE

Calliope

2006

Armstrong Atlantic State University
Volume XXII

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"Calliope" is published annually by and for the students of Armstrong Atlantic State University. The Student Government Association of AASU provides funding for each publication. Student submissions are collected through the fall semester for the following year's publication. All submissions are read and chosen through an anonymous process to ensure an equal opportunity for every student. The Lillian Spencer Awards are presented for outstanding submissions in art, fiction, and poetry. The recipients of this award are chosen by the staff from the student submissions received that year.

For more information on submissions, or if you are interested in working on the 2007 "Calliope" staff, please contact Dr. Christopher Baker in the Languages, Literature, and Philosophy Department located in Gamble Hall.

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. . . [A]rt is not meant to stop the stream of life. Within a narrow span of duration and space the work of art concentrates a view of the human condition; and sometimes it marks the steps of progression, just as a man climbing the dark stairs of a medieval tower assures himself by the changing sights glimpsed through its narrow windows that he is getting somewhere after all.

Rudolf Arnheim, "Entropy and Art"

You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.

Mark Twain

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Letter From the Editor

One of the powers of art is its ability to allow us to see through another's eyes. Exciting art contains truths that can only be revealed by viewing life from another's perspective. The goal of this year's "Calliope" staff was to produce a magazine that reflects the creative diversity of the students at AASU, so that the readers can see life through many different perspectives.

The fiction, poetry, and art within this magazine transported this staff to other places and times. From the seat of a wheelchair to behind an arcade counter, the short stories reveals truths through humor and tragedy sometimes within the same piece. The poetry examines topics such as the price of heroism, asking questions not easily answered. The artwork, both striking and subtle, fills the magazine with vibrance and color. Through various mediums such as photography and charcoal, the artwork realizes the world of dreams mingled with reality that the fiction and poetry illustrate with words. Above all, this issue of "Calliope" offers these talented students (many of them, for the first time) to see their ideas realized and most of all, gives others the opportunity to see reality in a new way.

This magazine does not feature art for art's sake nor diversity for diversity's sake. The purpose is for the readers to see the world of truths outside of themselves, if only just for a moment. The art within this year's "Calliope," hopefully, will not only allow its readers to escape but to understand something beyond their own experiences.

Candy Boy

by Paige Washington

There was a reason the women said he was so sweet. I heard that when his mama was carrying him, she had a terrific sweet tooth. Sure, she ate healthy enough to satisfy the old women in starch white uniforms that smelled of liniment and rubbing alcohol. But how would they know that the balanced meals fell somewhere between her round the clock snack time. Gummy bears and chocolate and bubble gum all day long, but she liked nothing more than her sugary sweet gum drops.

A thick layer of sugar on top, gooey sweet through and through was the way he came out. His mama licked her lips every time she planted a kiss on that boy's cheek. As he got older, all the girls did too. Running behind him like he was an ice cream truck, with a magical bell or something just as dooming. The clever little girls called him Candy Boy.

"Candy Boy," they'd whine. "Candy Boy," they'd moan as he kissed them good night on his stoop. Their own special name for him.

I couldn't help but see them from my window. It didn't surprise me how every girl that brought him home seemed unconcerned with Gum Drop's immediate disinterest in them as they furiously waved goodbye. That scene replayed at least three times a week. Each time a different girl.

Of them all, Meka Tanner was the worst. She made me sick walking around with her nose in her behind like she was Gum Drop's only. Like all the other girls knew about her, she had to know about all the other girls.

From my window, I could see the disappointment on Meka's face. The same look every time she dropped him home and wasn't invited in. Gum Drop leaned in and whispered to her and she smiled just a little.

I sighed and walked away from the window. How could these girls let themselves be fooled like that? Every single one of them knew Gum Drop was no good. They had to know they weren't the only ones calling him Candy Boy as they gazed dreamily into those hazelnut eyes beneath thick dark cotton eyebrows.

Something plopped on the bed beside me. A Sugar Daddy sucker. I looked up in time to see another sail through the window at me. Gum Drop stood on his stoop glaring at me.

"Boy, what do you think you're doing?"

"I thought I'd give you something to eat while you spied on me. What's a movie without popcorn?"'

I put my hand on my hip and rolled my eyes. "There you go again with that big ol' watermelon head of yours. I come to my window every night to get some air and think."

He sat on the railing closest to my window. From there I could see the icing in his eyes. The yellow of the street lights buttered his skin into a deep milk chocolate. He wasn't all that.

He threw up his hands in surrender. "Alright, alright. I was just playing."

I sucked my teeth and threw the candy back to him. "Since you just playing, you can have these suckers back. I don't eat candy. My teeth are too sensitive."

Gum Drop laughed. "Now ain't that a twist. A black woman admitting she's weak. Ain't you a find?"

"Weakness and sensitivity are two separate ideas," I said representing my college education. "And weakness is an idea I know nothing about. I would have guessed you would know the difference by now."

"Why's that?"

"From all your experience, you should know the difference in all class of women."

He shrugged and smiled up at me. "I know a classy lady when I see one. Can I help they usually see me first? Don't roll your eyes at me." He was quiet for a while. I was sure he was trying to decide what to say next. He didn't usually have conversations with women whose heads weren't floating twelve feet above her shoulders. I was the first. He just sat there staring off into a starless sky. I knew that there was something smart he wanted to say. I just knew it wasn't going to be about the #1 book on the bestseller list. Probably more about who was #1 on 106 and Park that night. The views of Ms. Morrison or Mr. Wright had no place in his busy agenda. The last book Gum Drop read was more likely *Hansel and Gretel*.

He leaned against the brick and folded his arms. "What do you mean I'm experienced?"

He knew what I was talking about. Gum Drop was always so cocky. He might have thought that I was going to fall into his mindless crowd of admirers and tell him how much of a Mack he was. But for as

long as we'd been neighbors, he couldn't get it through his head that I wasn't one of the other girls. I preferred Equal to sugar.

I leaned out of the window. "If I have to explain that word to you, I'm giving you more credit than you deserve."

Gum Drop stepped to the other side of the railing and jumped down to the sidewalk. He walked over to my stoop where my mother kept her array of potted flowers and aloe vera, and propped a foot up on the step.

"You know something. When I was young, I used to love fairy tales. Oh yeah. I remember listening to Little Red Riding Hood in Ms. Hurley's kindergarten class. Little Red Riding Hood trying to get to grandma's house. It was the stupidest story I'd ever heard. Even as a little kid, who could believe that nonsense?"

I was appalled at his ignorance. "That is a classic story. What do you mean, it's nonsense? The story has lasted through time. What do you know about classic literature?"

Gum Drop shrugged his shoulders. "All I know is that the little red breezie in the story was asking for trouble. Come on, how gullible can you be? How could she believe this big hairy wolf was anything as sweet as he claimed to be? To make it so bad, she called him on everything and yet she stood there giggling." His voice went up an octave, "Grandma, what big eyes you have –tee hee. Grandma what big teeth you have – tee hee hee."

I couldn't help but laugh at his humorous description. There was some truth to it.

He laughed with me, tilted his head up toward my window and threw the candy back to me. It landed on my bed. "I'm just saying Ma, if she could see the wolf was hairy with huge slobbering teeth, why would she waste another minute in there with him? Ain't no way that wolf smelled like cookies and pies like a grandma is supposed to. That's what I mean when I say women are weak. What's being said to y'all is far too important to pay attention to what's happening. I guess you want what you want too badly to trust your own eyes. And most of the time what you see is what you get."

The street light flickered brightly above his head.

"Can't get mad at me."

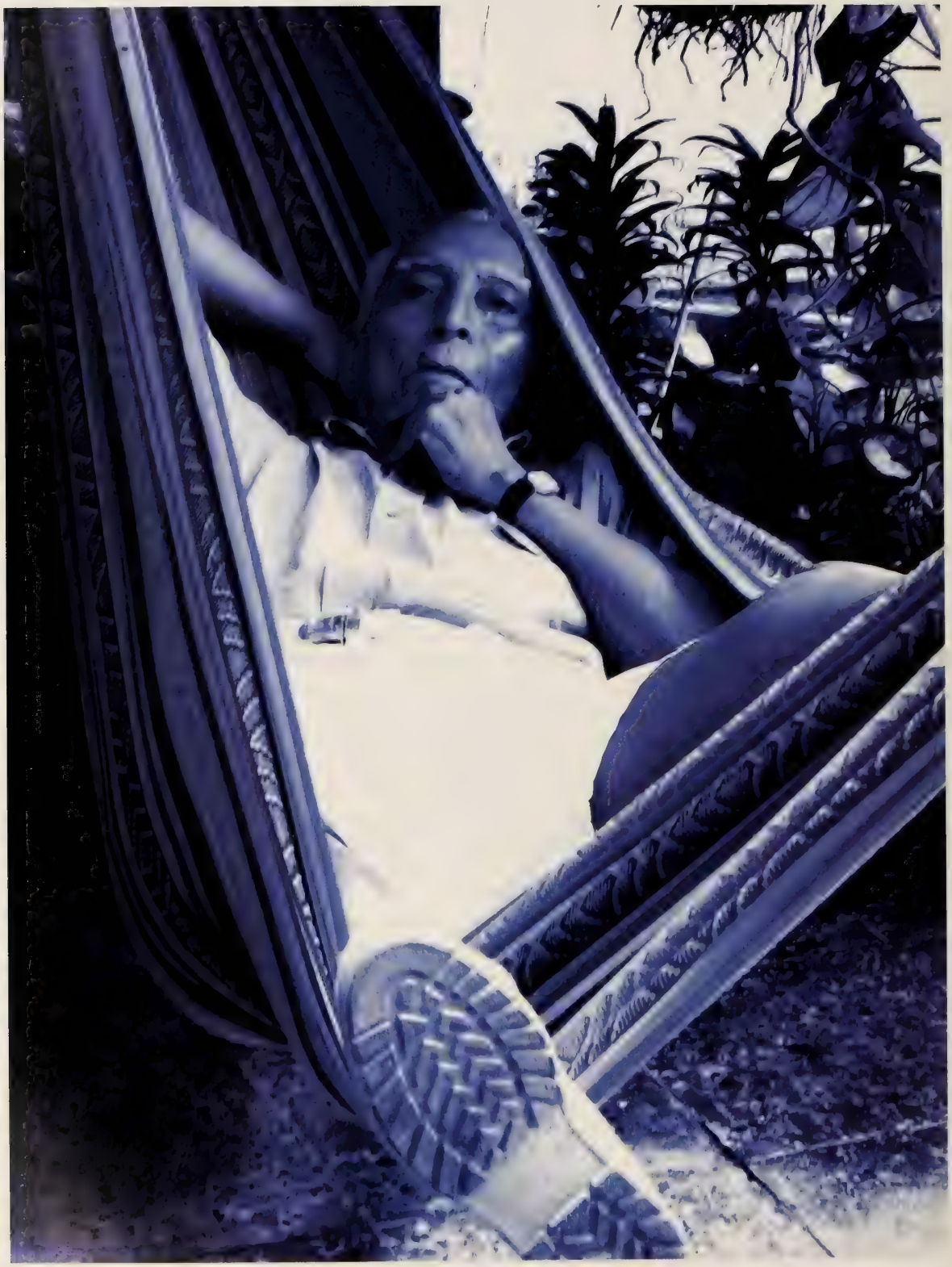
Headlights shined onto our block as a car turned. Gum Drop mumbled a cuss word under his breath. "I told her to go home." Meka's blood red Miata pulled up in front of my stoop. To my surprise and Gum Drop's delight, her outfit had completely morphed into a halter top and the shortest shorts she could cut up in twenty minutes.

Meka wiggled up to him. "Candy Boy," she whimpered when she reached for his arm.

"What's wrong?" He didn't move from his stance on the stoop.

"I went all the way home when I realized I can't get into the house. My sister has my keys and won't be home until tomorrow." She grabbed his hand and tugged. "I need you, Candy Boy."

Gum Drop looked up and smiled his toothy grin. He winked. I watched as they drove off in the Miata. I went to the bed and picked up the Sugar Daddy. I opened it and let it melt on my tongue.



"Pobre Pero Rico," Apokalyptik, Digital Print

Ocean Breathes Salty

by Whitney Hattaway

In a small hut in Sri Lanka, a man is lying on his back on a wooden cot. His skin blends with the darkness of the mahogany wood and he is camouflaged until he opens his eyes. He lies awake for a long time, listening to his family. Quietly, he turns over on his side to get a better view. They do not see him in the hut and he likes it that way.

Outside, his four children are drawing pictures of the ocean in the dirt with a stick. Their collaboration forms a masterpiece of waves and ridges. And next to them is his wife, bent over a basket of laundry. He can see her through the doorway, fishing through the wetness of fabric, pulling each tangled shirt or dress up to the light and shaking the water free. The droplets of water catch the sunlight and illuminate as they fall to the floor and speckle the dirt.

After a while, his arm falls asleep, so he shifts his weight a little. Beneath him, the cot moans and reveals him as a spy. His children abandon their art and come over to his bed where he feigns sleep. His smallest child climbs onto his chest and squeezes his mocha cheeks together. The child's airy laugh fills the hut and he grabs her and begins to tickle her. His wife drops the shirt she was wringing out and watches them. She has always loved his smile; those gaps from the missing teeth and the way his eyes crinkle and light up like crescent moons. The family gathers around their father, all laughing, and the sound drifts out into the village and is carried away by the wind.

. . .

The woman in the second row, window seat, leans her head against the window. For a long time she stares into the emptiness of the clouds, her head vibrating from the velocity of the plane. After a while the dreariness of England begins to fall away, transforming from a dull gray to a warm, exotic paradise. Below the islands float atop the mermaid blue water like weightless stones. Tiny vessels dot the surface like ink droplets. The clouds begin to thin, revealing her destination below. The tear drop of India, Sri Lanka.

The captain comes over the intercom. "Ladies and gentlemen, we'll be landing shortly. Please return all seats and trays to the upright position and fasten your seatbelts. We hope you enjoyed your flight with us. Thank you for flying British Airways and welcome to Sri Lanka."

Nervously, the woman drums her fingers on the armrest and sighs. Landing is the worst part, but any minute now, she thinks, we'll be in paradise.

. . .

Raj Shu kisses each child's forehead before he leaves for the day. Then, he kisses his wife and whispers into the shell of her ear that he loves her. When he does this, his hands rove up the side of her body feeling her bones against the softness of her dress and the warmth of her face brushing his.

After he does this, he begins travelling down the worn path through the village and down to the ocean. When he gets to the corner of his street, he turns and waves to his family who are standing at the door of the hut, waving back. Here, he pauses one last time. But things look different today. His wife looks more beautiful. His eldest boy, more strong. And the smallest one, he notices, has his smile. In realizing that, Raj decides he will pay more attention next time.

And with a sigh, Raj drops his hand and continues down the road.

. . .

The glass doors of the airport slide open and Emily emerges, pushing her sunglasses over her eyes and pulling her curly, chestnut hair into a ponytail. The heat wafts against her face and she recoils for a moment not used to the humidity. Following the locals, through a trail of palm trees she finally sees the village by the sea. Emily smiles and takes a deep breath, tasting the salty ocean air and smelling the fish from one of the fish market stands. All around her the locals were going about their everyday trials, buying food for their families, riding they're bike to work. As they speak, they gesture wildly with their hands and their dark eyes flash in the sunlight. The scenery looks so wonderfully earthy, as if the people sprang forth from

the dark roads of the earth themselves.

Coming around another bend in the road, she finds her hotel. Standing alone next to a group of little bungalows, it looks like a massive, white fortress. It looks out of place. The woman behind the desk asks her her name and gives her a key. Her room is on the fourth floor and when she pushes open the door, she notices that she can see many miles out to sea.

It's perfect, she thinks. Absolutely, perfect.

. . .

Raj has an attraction to the sea. He was born on the beach, in fact. One summer day, his father and mother were having a picnic down by the water when his mother went into labor. A crowd stood around to watch, but Raj's father was alone in delivering him. His father and mother didn't notice that the water kept creeping closer and closer, even though it wasn't high tide, as if the foamy fingers of the sea wanted to steal Raj away and keep him for themselves. The townspeople realized it though and after Raj slipped out of his mother, one of the wise men of the village claimed that Raj had controlled the sea. Confused, his parents turned to the water. As the man had said, the water level was inches from where their bodies lay and was washing away all the blood.

So, everytime Raj had a birthday, his father would tell him the story of the sea and they would go down to the ocean for a picnic just like that day. Raj never believed it, however. But today was different. His parents have long been dead and today is his birthday and he wants to spend it next to the ocean.

. . .

Emily looks over the balcony of her hotel room. The people below look like washed up fish, frying in the noon day sun. She pulls on her black bikini and a pair of khaki shorts. Grabbing her knapsack, she closes her door and locks it.

Instead of taking the elevator, she takes the stairs. Winding her way down as fast as she can, excited to get to the beach. She walks for a while, feeling the grainy sand stick to her toes, sometimes getting close to the water and sometimes walking along in the shade of the palm trees. She finally stops at the north in the beach where most of the locals gather. There, she spreads her beach towel out and it fans around her.

Emily watches the locals who have gathered. To her right, a family of six is having a lunch. They talk rapidly in a language she doesn't understand. Someone has a radio on, playing Western rock n' roll. And to her right, a fragile looking man emerges from one of the waves. She watches him walk, swinging his arms like pendulums. He wrings out his clothes, leaving a trail of water behind him in the sand.

He must sense her watching because he stops to look at her. She waves awkardly.
He smiles. Some of his teeth are missing. He resembles a gap toothed Jack-o-lantern she thinks.

He comes towards her.

. . .

It took Raj an hour to reach the ocean. Halfway through the village he decides to stop at the fish stand. The man behind the rickety, wooden stand wrapped his fish in wax paper and they talked about they're families for a while.

Raj always knows when he is close to the beach because the dirt road begins to thin and through the palm trees you can see the blue of the water. After he jumps over a silvery piece of driftwood, he takes off in a run down to the water. Like a child seeing the ocean for the first time, he throws down his knapsack and jumps into the sea.

Under the water, he opens his eyes. Tiny fish dart in and out of his view as he paddles along. He turns onto his back and floats to the surface. Past all the tidal waves now he is free from the chaos of the beach. He becomes a piece of driftwood, letting the current carry him. After several minutes, Raj cuts into a wave and is thrown back onto shore.

He laughs and lays on the sand for a moment looking up at the sky. From where he is laying he feels the earth move. Raj feels like a tiny grain of sand in the ocean of the universe.

Laying upside down, he can see a woman walking by. She radiates with her pearly skin and dark, brown hair. Raj turns over like he did that morning in his cot. Trying to get a better look, without revealing himself. From her knapsack she pulls a bright, red towel and flings it towards the sky. Raj gets up and begins to walk away, but she is watching him.

Grinning he walks over to her.

. . .

Emily didn't notice that she was sitting next to an abandoned knapsack. Not until this man sat next to her and scooped it up into his narrow, bird-like hands. They do no speak the same language, but communicate in gestures and darting eyes. He points to her skin and smiles.

"My skin, yes, very pale," she says. "Your skin is so beautiful, like the color of wood."

They go on like this for several minutes, not knowing that they are both complementing the other. From his bag, he pulls out a small parcel wrapped in wax paper. Inside is some kind of meat, neatly chopped into little, red slivers. The man holds the crinkling package in his open palms and offers it to Emily. She nods and takes a piece of the meat.

The man is always smiling, she thinks. He will probably die smiling, too.

Together on the beach, Emily eats with this stranger. She has no idea where he came from, appearing to be born from the sea itself, not knowing his name or why he's sitting with her, but she eats with him, like she's known him all of her life.

. . .

While he is eating, Raj watches the woman's jawbone, the gentle curve of her chin moving up and down. He likes the crystal color of her eyes and the softness of her pale lips. He tells her this in his language, although he knows she will not understand.

When they finish eating the fish, Raj crumples up the wax paper. When he looks up again, the woman is pointing to the sea. The water has disappeared. The abandoned fish lay flopping, their gills trying to collect as much air as they can, opening and closing again and again. All of the tourists have run out to the now dry land, taking pictures of the transformed landscape.

And the woman, reaches out to touch his arm with her cold hands and tells him something that he cannot possibly comprehend, her forehead filled with creases of concern. And then she is gone.

Raj does not move from this spot or go down to the dried up land. Instead he stays seated on the woman's red towel, feeling the earth move again.

. . .

Emily had a feeling it was coming. The receding water. The earth shaking. Something massive was coming. She told him to run, to get off the beach as fast as possible, but he only looked at her. As she ran from the beach she shouted at all the people, to anyone who would listen, to get to higher ground. Some followed her. Some simply stared.

As she wound up the stairwell for the second time that morning, she realized she had left everything on the beach. That didn't matter now. She had to get to her video camera.

Every bone in her body shook uncontrollably as she forced the key in the lock and scrambled to get the camera. "Calm down" became her mantra. "Calm down. Calm down," she told herself. Some people came out of their room, they must have heard her shouting. She points the camera out to the sea.

And there it was.

It was as if Poseidon himself had saddled his frothing sea horses and they were coming, waging a war on the people of Sri Lanka.

Or was this the apocalypse?

Was the world going to end today?

Emily prepared herself, there on the fourth floor of the hotel.

. . .

There on the horizon, the ocean was building a wall. Raj stands on the bright, red towel and shields his eyes from the sun. He has no idea what is coming. Maybe it was just a small wave, maybe he was dreaming. The woman wasn't real. This day wasn't real. He was asleep in his small hut, next to his wife.

All around him the people were screaming. Fleeing in terror, but all were gone by the time the wave actually hit. Except Raj.

Bracing himself against whatever lay ahead, Raj was to be the first casualty.

. . .

Emily trained her video on the only person left on the beach. He was a speck on her screen and unable to see his face, she didn't know that this was the man she had previously sat with. While everyone else fled, this man remained, walking further out to sea.

. . .

Minutes, then seconds before his death, Raj Shu thought of his family. Of kissing his children's foreheads, of his wife kissing him, their tiny hut, his parents by the ocean, the taste of the fish on his tongue, and the sound of the palm trees scraping together in the wind. All of the things he would never know again.

And Raj laughed.

Thirty seconds before.

He threw up his hands and screamed into the sky.

And it seemed only fitting that the ocean that he controlled when he was born was now swallowing him up and taking him back. And the last thing he saw was the white foam of the sea.

. . .

Two weeks later, they found Raj's body tangled up with a piece of driftwood under a dock. Some of the villagers pulled his body from the water and laid him on the cool wood of the dock. He was still smiling.

When the doctor performing his autopsy pulled off his seeping shoes, they found a picture in one of the soles. A picture of a middle-aged woman and four children.

. . .

Emily went down to the sea after three days. Her things were gone, having been washed away into the sea. But she wasn't here for her things. Instead, she pulled a video camera out of her bag and threw it into the sea.

"Tree," Apokalyptik, Digital Print

Safety Scissors

by Karen White

"Julie, there is something wrong with your child."

Julie had been on her feet all day making glasses in a small optical company. Upon walking through the door, she was hit by a peculiar scene. Her six-year-old daughter who she had named after her favorite Grandmother, Martha, sat on the hardwood stairs, peering from around where the wall joined the black, hard iron railing of stairs. Her mother, Lynn, stared at her, waiting for some sort of an answer to the statement about her daughter's odd appearance. Her father, Jerry, rattled his newspaper in the other room, and ignored the happenings of the women. Julie heard her stomach growl. It is 8 p.m. Her daughter should have been in bed at least an hour ago. Instead, her daughter's eyes were wide open, too wide, naked in fact.

"Mom, Martha seems to have cut her eyelashes off. And her eyebrows. And what looks like a significant chunk of hair from the back of her head," Julie sighed, "again."

Lynn's mouth puckered into its usual tight scowl. She darted her tongue out to the corner of her mouth, tasting the air like a snake. She whipped her head around to peer at the girl on the stairs, the girl with the naked eyes.

"Go to your room. Now. Get your scissors. Now. Bring them to me. Now." Lynn's tone dripped with glee over the soon to be delivered punishment. Lynn liked punishment. Lynn liked chaos. Lynn liked ruling her roost.

Julie looked at her mother, knowing what would probably happen. First, Lynn would grab the scissors, Martha's favorite toy, and break them in front of her daughter's bare face. Then, Lynn would grab the wooden spoon kept lovingly next to the stove for just such occasions. Julie knew and hated this spoon. The spoon had outlived Presidents. The spoon was God's wrath.

Martha shook her head, negating the order. Martha knew Lynn. She knew about spoons. She did not, however, know that Lynn was God.

Martha turned from sitting to leaning on all fours, then climb-crawled up the stairs with her little butt waving in the air. Julie smiled a bit at the action, seeing it for its cuteness. She sighed again.

"Mom, weren't you watching her?"

"Well, considering that you haven't paid me my baby-sitting fee this week, no, I wasn't. She came home, didn't even talk to me, and went straight to her room, where she has been all day, quiet as a church mouse at Easter. In my day, adults only check on kids when they make a ruckus. Apparently, you know different about raising kids. You've been doing a bang-up job so far." Lynn glowered at Julie, hurling a much-overused statement about parenting.

"Mom, I'm doing my best. I'm sorry I haven't paid you, but business has been slow and tips have been drying up at my other job." Julie could almost hear Lynn calculating the lack of beer money in her head instead of considering the well being of her own granddaughter.

Jerry got up from his recliner and came into the hall, clearing his throat to announce his presence. Stone-faced, he looked over at his wife, gauging her emotional barometer, and then he glanced at his daughter, plainly seeing the exhaustion on her face. He stood for a moment, taking in the scene as if it was a much loved and much seen play, breathing in the tension and digesting it slowly. He wanted to stand up for Julie, but he too feared the wrath of his wife. The only solution he had for her drinking was not to give her the money or any hope for money to buy the beer. Otherwise, he stayed out of it because staying out of it was just easier.

"Julie, don't worry about the money for room and board this week. Just make up for it next week," Jerry muttered, glancing sideways at his wife for permission.

"Oh, ho, okay, now we can turn down money in this house. Have you noticed the price of food lately, dear? You don't do the shopping or the cleaning. I do it. You don't see that six-year-old garbage disposal with a penchant for trimming everything in sight as she eats us out of house and home. You don't have to bathe her or put up with her constant silence. All you have to do is go to work, come home to a pleasantly prepared meal, and sit down to your little nightly rituals. I need the money to keep this well-oiled machine going."

Lynn worked herself into a self-imposed tizzy, eyes blazing, spittle drying on the corners of her mouth like the remnants of poison at the bottom of an arsenic suspension. Julie had seen this all before, as had Jerry. Julie responded by going to the kitchen for a hasty meal of condensed cream of eat shit and die soup. Jerry went to the den to begin his Thursday night ritual: network sitcoms until ten, then whatever cop show came on, then the news, then the bathroom, then bed, then sweet, succulent, escapist sleep.

Lynn stood for a moment, chest heaving, nostrils flaring with the stress of breathing, deciding which offending family member deserved her fury first. She looked toward the warm light spilling from the kitchen, hearing her traitor daughter heating up her cheap can of soup, eschewing the guilt ridden leftovers from that night's meal. Then she switched her view to the stark, flickering light from the den, evidence that her weak-minded husband was trying yet again to thwart her with the bland falseness of television. Then she raised her eyes heavenward, as if to query God for advice on the situation or to contemplate just how hard she was going to beat the reticent child located in that direction. She chose the kitchen; vocal guilt trips always warmed her up for physical altercations.

Upstairs, Martha meticulously packed her little purple overnight bag with the picture of Rainbow Brite on the side. First, she carefully rolled up her favorite nightgown, the one with the cartoon duck with an umbrella. The nightgown was once red, but through over-washing, had faded to a dull pinkish, reddish see-through softness. The little duck had started to crack, but Martha loved it just the same.

Next, she rolled up a pair of jeans and her favorite T-shirt, also once red, but now held together by mere threads. She added a pair of socks, two pairs of white underwear with pink flowers, and her pink princess comb and toothbrush set. Finally, she topped her run away from home sundae with a glaringly white washcloth and a small notepad with attached pencil. She walked over to her closet and began the decision-making process surrounding her shoes. She could grab the comfy white sneakers her mom had bought her a month before, or she could go for the supremely uncomfortable brown and cream saddle shoes her grandmother had bought the day before. Surprisingly, she became confused because she thought that maybe breaking in the new shoes might be a good idea, and running away seemed to be a chance to break them in. However, the sneakers were more practical in the case she had to sleep outside or literally run away from anyone. She grabbed the sneakers with a content smile on her face.

Her final missing piece to her much thought out plan for vacating the house was the pair of red safety scissors on her bedside table. She picked them up as delicately as a mother cat grasps her kitten with her teeth. There was a sense of danger when Martha held them, but the danger was overshadowed by pure love. Martha thought about her scissors. She had silently cut things to tatters everyday since she got them when she was four. First, she innocently started with paper dolls and magazines. However, soon after, she attacked household items with a stealthy battle plan that would make any general weep with joy.

The first casualty was a maroon jumper her grandmother had pieced together out of hand-me-down fabric. Martha hated that patchwork dress with the same fervor that she loved her scissors. She was careful to cut only the threads holding the patches together. Snip, one patch fell to the floor. Snip, snip, there goes a big, ugly gold button, how sad.

The only thing Martha destroyed that was a source of regret for her was her mother's hand crocheted afghan. Julie had made it while pregnant with Martha, amidst the constant berating from Lynn about how Julie deserved every pain and drop of sweat caused by the pregnancy. Martha knew this story well enough; at least once a week Lynn would drunkenly remind Martha that she was unplanned and ill gotten. Yes, mother was eighteen when she'd had her, but Martha knew Julie had already finished high school by that point. Yes, the father was unknown to anyone save her mother, and, every Christmas, Lynn demanded that Julie admit to who had knocked her up. Julie never told, which was the only battle she ever won against her tyrant mother. Julie seemed fine with the whole Immaculate Conception idea, so Martha never asked, plus Martha never would deny her mother the one win against grandma. That would be worse than cutting the afghan.

When Julie found the shredded afghan, she cried silently, but held onto her daughter. Martha also cried silently, and tried to apologize with a hug and a sniffle. Julie stroked her daughter's fine, brown hair and simply said, "I'm sorry. I know you didn't mean it. I can make another."

Martha stopped thinking about the afghan, feeling the hot prickles of tears at the corners of her eyes. Instead of succumbing to them, she put the tears back and stashed her scissors in the right pocket of her jeans. She locked her bedroom door as a measure to stall for time. She checked the time, only 8:30, then climbed out the window to the tree by the roof over the porch. She shimmied down the tree, walked to the sidewalk, looked both ways four times, then crossed the street and started walking at an even pace to the left, in the direction of her friend Sue.

Martha had only been to Sue's house once, for a birthday party the year before. Lynn did not like Sue because, as she claimed, Sue's whole family smelled of fish heads and rice. Sue was Vietnamese, a fact that didn't really enter into Martha's estimation, though it did figure into Lynn's decision to keep the girls away from each other, except for at school, a domain where Lynn was not allowed by law. Martha loved school.

Even though Martha had only visited once, she knew the path well, having gone over it again and

again in her mind. Sue lived in a one-story brick house, perfect for sneaking in, as Martha's climbing abilities fell far short of her talent for descending a tree. She knew Sue would let her in because Sue was her best friend. Not her only friend, Martha had tons of superficial friends, but Sue was the best because she never questioned Martha's need to be silent. Sue knew the reason and was quite the chatterbox, so she liked Martha's quiet ways, enjoying the ability to talk unchecked.

Martha walked up to her friend's bedroom window and tapped on the glass. A small light came on, and the window opened out as Sue cranked the handle with all her might. She saw Martha and smiled.

"I just knew you'd come tonight. I told Mom that something big was going to happen tonight. Do you want some food? Come to the front door; mom knew you'd be here; she saw your grandma at the store today. She won't tell anyone."

Martha smiled brightly and ran to the front door. By the time she'd arrived, Sue's mother had begun opening the door. Martha breathed in the house smell fragranced like a summer breeze at the beach, redolent with the salty-greasy smell of fried fish and the smooth-milky smell of coconut. Sue's mother smiled at her and motioned for Martha to come in.

In the living room, the sofa was made up with a sheet and a blanket, like a little bed. Next to the sofa was a small bowl of soup with mysterious noodles and vegetables in a base of coconut milk. Next to that was a small plate with two pieces of fried fish wrapped in a grease catching paper towel. To complete the girl-sized meal was a small mug containing more milk than tea and lots of sugar, which was, in Martha's estimation, perfect little girl nectar. Martha plopped on the sofa, smiled a toothy, excited grin of thanks at Sue's mother, and dug into the feast.

Sue's mother smiled maternally at Martha, taking in her bald eyes and the missing chunk of hair, both of which made her chuckle, knowingly. Sue's mother avidly loved this little girl she saw so rarely, a girl who Sue talked about incessantly after school, a girl who never spoke, but managed to get along just fine with a closed mouth. She stroked Martha's hair, delicately, kissed her forehead, dimmed the light, and left Martha to finish her meal and go to sleep. On her way to the bedroom, she checked on Sue, who had obediently gone straight back to sleep with a satisfied smile on her face. Sue's mother went in, fixed her daughter's covers, kissed her forehead, and finished her journey to her bedroom.

In the bedroom, Sue's mother looked at the phone with a wrinkled brow. She remembered Lynn from the birthday party, a drunken woman who cared about no one except for herself. She had met Julie briefly at an open house the school hosted. Julie and she had gotten along pleasantly, attempting to set up play dates for their children. However, Lynn put a stop to that. Sue's mother reached for the phone book to find Martha's home number. She found it, but hesitated with her hand wavering over the handset. "What's one night?" she thought, "She can sleep here and go home tomorrow."

Sue's mother heard a noise at the door. Sue was standing in the doorway.

"Are you gonna call the cops, Mom?"

Sue's mother shook her head. "No, honey. I think that would cause too much trouble for Martha. I'm just going to call her family so they won't worry."

Sue picked up the handset and dialed. The phone rang, but no one answered. Sue watched, wide-eyed, hoping that Martha could move in with them forever. Her mother hung up the phone, then told her daughter to go to bed.

In the cozy living room, Martha finished her food, drank the last drop of the tea, then unpacked her little bag. She removed her washcloth, comb and toothbrush set, and nightgown. She toddled to the bathroom and readied for bed by brushing her teeth and washing her face, then combing her choppy, short hair into some semblance of smoothness. Then she put on her safety nightgown and went to bed.

As Martha was brushing her teeth in Sue's bathroom, her mother spoke to her closed door at Grandma's. Julie knocked softly, not really expecting any vocal recognition of the entreaty for entrance, but hoping for at least an invitation through a knob turned by small fingers. In the distance, she heard the phone ringing. She didn't get it.

"Honey, I have to go to work. I know you're upset, so is your grandmother, trust me," Julie muttered. "I promise I'll make it better, but you have to try to get along with her until we can leave. I'm trying to save money, but I have to pay her to live here, and she keeps going up on the rent. Can you believe she said I could pay next week, but that I have to pay an extra hundred a month?" Julie said, more to herself than to her absent daughter. "Well, we'll figure something out. Just get some sleep and have fun at school tomorrow. I'll probably be at work before you get up. Try to eat your breakfast; it'll make her happy," Julie finished, voice thick with tears.

Julie backed away from the door, dressed in her humiliating cocktail waitress uniform of a short black skirt, a tight, white button-up shirt, and black pantyhose with the required line up the back of the legs, really

just arrows to her ass. To add further insult to further injury, three-inch vinyl stiletto heels finished the outfit. Her back ached with defeat and the weight of three jobs requiring her to be on her feet every minute. She realized she hadn't actually seen her daughter in two days, except for the drama on the stairs, because of their schedules. She wiped away a tear, her head aching with the knowledge that her daughter was growing up too fast, much like she had to do when she was young.

Downstairs, Jerry sighed. His wife and her vitriol were still at it, a dull drone of hate as a backdrop to the fluffy, lighthearted comedy playing out on the television. Jerry efficiently managed a security office during the day, a place of refuge in the storm of his wife. He remembered the Lynn he married, full of life and smiles, only a social drinker, and always bedecked in a fun wig to top off a wild outfit. Those were the good old days, the sixties. Then she had Julie. At first she loved the child; Julie never really gave them much trouble. Lynn baked her daughter cookies everyday, ironed her sheets, doted on her every move. All the while, Lynn took shots from a not-so-hidden bottle of vodka. Jerry saw the signs; he'd grown up in a small town in Oklahoma. He'd seen women broken by drinking, women who had nothing to live for, displaced women. Lynn was not displaced; she was a bomb waiting to go off. But, Jerry was no bomb specialist; he was just a man who wanted to get through each day.

Lynn glared at her husband, leering with the knowledge that she'd browbeaten him into apathy once again. She stood, then turned to her sewing bag, her hiding place, her altar. She snatched it up and pranced to the kitchen, her harmonious church dedicated to petty tortures. The kitchen was the scene for most of her victories. It housed her wooden spoon, but it also contained a garbage disposal (perfect for paper dolls), a microwave oven (splendid method to melt crayons), and a set of three barstools (made for the express purpose of interrogation).

Lynn lovingly placed the sewing bag beside the refrigerator, then walked over to the utensil caddy and picked up a wooden spoon. She tapped it against the cast iron skillet above her stove, sniffing in the bleach from her sink, listening to the light bonging her tapping was making. She walked to the sink and played the copper molds like drums, ignoring the scrapes they left in the bubble gum pink paint every time they moved when she hit them. She ran the spoon across the counter, and then scraped it against the iron trivets she had on the counter, waiting for hot dishes to rest on them. Lynn smiled; her mother gave her those trivets when she got married. She moved to the refrigerator and opened it. She ran the spoon across the grate of the shelves, then looked for her beer. She was out.

She closed the fridge and looked beside it at her sewing bag. The bag was tapestry, matching the pink walls in the kitchen. She opened the wooden dowels that held it closed and took out a pint of vodka, cheap vodka, rotgut swill. She tapped the spoon against the bottle, took a gulp, then tapped again, listening to the difference in tone when the contents diminished. She thought about watching people who play the glasses, filling each glass to different levels, then running their fingers over the rims. She loved the sound it made, deeper with more liquid, higher with less. She drank more vodka, then sat on her barstool. She tapped the bottle again. This time the tune was different, very high, unlike the level of vodka left in the bottle.

Another sound, shrill, interrupted her dance. Lynn swiveled to look at the blaring phone, perching her lips in thought. She slithered over to the wall phone and lightly tapped the phone off the handset, listening for the slight ping when she then tapped the connection to silence the phone. She grinned, hoping the call had been for Julie, maybe a call telling her daughter that she'd won a million dollars.

Lynn finished her drink. She had punishment to dole out; she needed nourishment. And, she'd earned it. She'd won against a spoiled daughter and spineless husband. All that was left was the reticent brat upstairs. No need to hurry, she sank down onto one of the barstools, put her head on the counter atop her nested arms, and fell asleep, dreaming about spoons and her father.

The next morning, Martha woke up and undid her bedtime ritual. She smelled something sweet frying as she pulled on her jeans in the bathroom. After she rewashed her face, rebrushed her teeth, and recombed her hair, she headed for Sue's kitchen. This kitchen was cozy with a little table set colorfully with orange placemats and a bouquet of daisies. Sue was already at the table digging into a plate of deep fried bananas when Martha walked in.

"Did you sleep okay? I did. I slept forever. I wish you could have slept in my room, but mom thought you'd want to be alone. Did you want to be alone? We get to go to school together on the bus today; won't that be fun?"

As Sue gushed at her, Martha started eating her breakfast. Lynn usually forced Martha into fried eggs, which Martha would forever hate. Sue's mother had deep fried bananas, something that seemed so exotic to Martha, yet comforting. The batter was slightly sweet and had a crispy puffiness. The bananas were warm and creamy, almost buttery. They tasted like love, like when Martha's mom made her favorite soup, French onion with extra cheese and a perfectly toasted round of bread floating over salty heaven.

Sue's mother walked past the girls, noticing Martha raise her eyebrows in thanks for the breakfast. She nodded at the girl, and then continued her path to the bedroom. Once there, she tried calling Martha's family again, but only heard the denial of the busy signal. She wanted to talk to Julie, but could not remember where Julie worked. She went back to the kitchen and asked Martha, who only shrugged her shoulders after encircling her eyes with tiny fingers. Sue's mother chuckled – Julie worked with eyeglasses, but Martha didn't know the name of the company.

After breakfast, the girls got onto the bus and went to school, as if nothing was out of the ordinary. At the moment after they'd sat down together and Sue had opened her mouth to begin a barrage of cheerful sisterly chatter, Lynn woke up. She groggily shook her head to clear the remnants of the vodka dance from the previous night, at least before the tooth-jarring headache set in. It wasn't too late; she could still take her ire out on the child before school, although she'd planned on reserving some punishment for after school, during dinner, after dinner, and before bed.

Lynn stepped jauntily up the stairs, whistling "Can't Buy Me Love." She strode up to Martha's closed door and stopped, confused. Usually the child was up before anyone else, probably to wreak havoc on Lynn's orderly house before anyone could stop her. But, the door remained closed, a fact that infuriated Lynn.

"That child has no right. No right to close the door. In my face. Like she owns the place."

Lynn began beating on the closed door. "Open up! Now! Get your no talking ass out here! It is most definitely time to meet … your … Maker!" Lynn bellowed with effort, tired from the alcohol floating in her cells and the exertion necessary to scare the crap out of a small child.

Yet, there was no answering movement, no whimper of fright, nothing. Droplets of sweat ran down the door, catching on the knob, as Lynn suctioned her ear against it in an attempt to hear anything. She quickly stood up and gripped the doorknob, which didn't budge. Instead, her hand slipped around the cold, oily metal coated in her sweat. Lynn remembered the crowbar she kept in her bedroom in case burglars broke into the house. She ran to the room, grabbed the bar, then ran back to pry the door from the frame.

"Playa del Coco," Apokalyptik, Digital Print

Once the door was open, Lynn took stock of the room. Item A: No child. Item B: Open window (inviting burglars). Item C: No overnight bag. Lynn turned and stalked downstairs to the telephone.

"Julie, Martha is missing."

Julie's heart dropped. She'd gone to bed for the few hours between jobs dreading having to make so much up to her child, but this brought spiky tears to her eyes.

"Mom, what do you mean missing? Where is she? She's six for Christ's sakes!' Julie whisper screamed.

"All I know is that your daughter packed a bag and left from the upstairs window. A pedophile probably picked her up and has chopped her to bits. Ironic, really, if you think about it."

Julie slammed the phone down on the trollish glee emitting from the receiver. She called her father's office.

"Hello, Sizemore Security, Jerry speaking."

Her father's business tone calmed Julie. "Dad, Martha's missing."

Jerry sighed. "Where do you think she is?"

Julie sat down on the lab stool by the phone. "Well, I hope she's at school, but if I call them and they find out she ran away, they might take her away. I know Dr. Bartley won't let me leave, and mom is in no shape to look for her."

Jerry thought for a moment. "Call her friend's house. That one down the street that Lynn hates so much, the Vietnamese one. Martha is a smart girl; I bet she went there."

Julie started to cry. "Dad, I don't know her last name. How can I call there?"

Jerry cleared his throat. Julie cringed at the tone in his voice, no longer business like, now suppressing sadness. "Julie, I've never really stuck my nose into how you raise your child. I know your mother is not the best role model. But, I know Martha will be fine. Remember when I took her in the woods to teach her how to camp? She picked it up like she was a little squirrel." Jerry sighed. "Besides, she sneaks over to Sue's house most everyday after dinner, just to get away from Lynn. Her mother's name is Thu Ngyen. She's a very nice woman; you met her at that open house."

Julie's hope woke. "Dad, I'm scared to death. I'll call Thu. Thanks." She hung up, sharply enough to make the phone jingle in the cradle. She swiped at the tears on her face, determined to control her emotions. "This isn't the time," Julie thought, then picked up the phone to call Information for Thu's number.

Meanwhile, the day passed with very little to mention. Jerry dispatched security guards and chewed many Tums. Lynn drank and baked a celebratory chocolate cake for herself, in honor of the brat being eaten by wolves in the wilderness. Julie spent most of her day chewing her bottom lip, trying not to cry as her boss said no to her request to leave work early. Pride kept her from telling him why. She'd finally reached Thu after lunch. Thu told her that Martha was fine and that she had tried calling optical companies all day looking for Julie. "I didn't want you to worry, Julie." Julie finally allowed her tears to fall and told Thu about her mother, the drinking, everything. Thu had only one question for her.

"Will you come tomorrow for dinner?"

"Yes, I have the day off." Julie's tone brightened. She needed a friend in the worst way, anything to get out of Grandma's house.

Martha had a great day. Ms. Manner gave her a new book, *A Wrinkle in Time*, to read, even though it was for bigger boys and girls. During recess, Martha scrutinized the playground, looking for shelter. The thought of staying another night at Sue's made her tummy drop because she knew they'd find her there. She decided on the mound-shaped jungle gym on soft grass. She looked at the sky, playing amateur meteorologist, checking out the cloud patterns for any hint of rain, like her grandpa had taught her. She saw none.

After school ended, as all the kids ran to the line of yellow buses, Martha hid out in the cloakroom of her classroom. She heard Ms. Manner talking to another teacher. Her voice sounded like bells.

"I don't know what to do. She won't speak at all, and the speech-language pathologist is already overloaded as it is. Her mother seems nice, but very tired. She'd very good at communicating through mime, and her mother hinted that stuttering is the underlying problem. I think there is more."

Martha knew she had to change schools. The act of opening her mouth caused her heart to race and sparkles to form in front of her eyes. She couldn't do it. She didn't need to do it.

After a while, Ms. Manner left. Martha sneaked out of the cloakroom, past the janitor's closet, and out the double doors to the playground. She made a beeline in the softening dusk to the monkey bars, like she was rushing for home base in a game of tag. The parking lot was empty. She had thought about just staying inside, but she was worried that late at night, they'd lock her in for the weekend. She had no food or water in there, but she could find something outside, even if she had to find her way back to Sue's.

Martha sat under the peeling, red and gray metal bars, Indian style. She pulled her overnight bag to

her side, clutching it. It felt hard and lumpy, unlike her rolled clothing usually felt in the bag. She opened it up and saw a brown paper bag and a note.

"Little one, here is some food. You can come here anytime, but we understand why you couldn't tonight. We love you. Thu."

"So that's Sue's mom's name," Martha thought. She opened the bag and saw a small bowl of what turned out to be rice and lemony beef, along with two small thermoses. One held more of the broth from the night before; the other held now warm milky tea. Martha ate heartily, tears running down her face. Then she wiped her face off with her washcloth, using the tears as a cleanser. Then she dry-brushed her teeth and went to sleep, using her bag as a pillow. In her midget hand she loosely clasped her scissors like the arm of a teddy bear.

Martha woke up to something banging against her little open-air hut. A squirrel had come out for the night to open a nut above her head. Martha watched it for a while, then looked at her red watch: 2:25 a.m.

"This squirrel should be in bed. I should be in bed," she thought drowsily. Martha considered her grandmother's all encompassing anger.

"Mom calls her God all the time." Martha's thoughts quickly became confusing. She saw the squirrel and thought of her grandfather taking her to the woods to teach her what she could and could not eat in a forest. She looked at the monkey bars and thought of how she climbed the stairs, crawling, because that way she could get to her room quicker to get away from grandma.

She thought about the first time that Grandma had scared her. Martha remembered that her Great-Grandfather was a mean man to her mom, yelling at her when she didn't bring him his drinks. Martha and her mom had lived there when she was little because Grandma was helping take care of him. She was four when he died; a lot of people came to the funeral, but no one cried, except for Martha. She cried because he used to give her candy from the counter at his store in Vermont. She was afraid that she'd never get to come back to Vermont since he died, but then she thought about Great-Grandma Martha still lived in her small house with the garden and knew she would be able to come back a lot.

Grandma was sick at the funeral. She kept trying to walk up to the casket, where Great-Grandpa was, and she kept trying to kick it. She yelled a lot. She kept drinking something from a glass bottle, and Grandpa tried to take it away from her, so she hit him in the head with it. Finally, Great-Grandma Martha walked up and took Grandma out of the room. Baby Martha followed them out to the hall.

In the hall, she saw her Grandma crying. "I can't do this. I'm glad he's dead, Ma. I wish he'd died before I was born."

Great-Grandma Martha, usually sweet and rosy-cheeked, turned pale. "That's an awful thing to say at your own father's funeral. I raised you better. And I raised you better than to be a drunk. Go to that place we took you to after you had Julie. Get cleaned up. You are ruining your family, again."

Baby Martha walked back into the big room with the flowers and the casket. She shuffled to her mother's side, then kissed her on the cheek. Julie looked over at Martha, smoothed her hair, and hugged her. "It'll be okay, honey. Grandma will get better now that he's gone. He was really mean to her."

Grandma had been okay, at least for a little while after that. Then Martha had to lock her out of the house because Grandma kept yelling and hit her with a spoon. Martha waited until Lynn went to get the mail, then locked the door. She couldn't reach the phone to call Grandpa, like Ms. Manner taught her to do if she was scared, call someone to help. After Grandpa came home, Grandma hugged her and cried a lot and said stuff about needing to rest. Martha cried too, scared that Grandpa would be mad. He wasn't, but he buy her a little step stool to reach the phone.

She looked at the stars and remembered her mother cooking a steak for her birthday, special, while she ate stupid noodle soup. She missed her mom. She lifted her chin, looking eerily like a miniature version of her mother, and thought, "I can handle Grandma. Grandpa and mom will help me." She picked up her bag and started walking home.

The school was not far from home. She really didn't need to take a bus in the morning; she mostly did that to see the other kids. She knew the way and tried to whistle like her mom would when she washed her hair in the morning before work. She couldn't quite get it; she was missing a couple of teeth, but she did get a feeble spray of spittle and notes.

While Martha walked home, Jerry sat in his armchair, in a fog. He'd taken Lynn to Tidewater, Virginia's answer to problems that just won't go away. He'd deliberated about it at work, until a dim memory cleared in him mind. He remembered the last time he'd sent Lynn away so he could think. It had been six months before, when Martha locked Lynn out of the house.

In his mind, Jerry walked up to the front door of his house, only to find a very drunk Lynn beating on the door. He tapped her on the shoulder, and she sharply turned to face him.

"She locked me out. Why would she lock me out?"

Jerry worked up some courage when he heard Lynn's tone of confusing rather than anger. "Well, Lynn, she's scared. Last week in school they talked about safety in the home. What did you do?"

Lynn sat on the stoop. "I was making dinner, and she came into the kitchen. When I saw her, I told her to go clean the table for dinner. After that, all I remember is being out here."

Jerry sat next to his wife. She leaned her head against his shoulder, crying. "I can't do it anymore, Jerry. I don't even know what I need anymore. I don't mean to yell at her, but she never says anything back, and then that just makes me madder."

Jerry smoothed his wife's hair. He stood up and pulled her up with him. "Lynn, let's find someone to help. Maybe you need a vacation again."

Lynn just nodded. Jerry unlocked the door; they walked into the house to find the table cleaned for dinner, all of the pot handles turned inward on the stove (to prevent spilling, Martha really took the safety talk seriously), and Martha asleep on the sofa. Jerry called Julie at work to tell her about his decision, and then called Tidewater. Again.

After he cleared the memory, Jerry called Tidewater, but worried about its effectiveness. So far, Lynn had stayed there ten months, off and on, for the past three years. Jerry didn't know what else to do, and he refused to watch Lynn breakdown one more kid, like she had Julie.

Jerry settled more into his armchair, remembering his decision at work earlier that day, not regretting it, exactly, more hoping it mattered at all. He almost stood to go out and look for Martha, street by street. His heart hurt.

When Martha got home, she found her mother dozing on the front step, waiting for her. The exhausted look was gone, tight worry lines around the eyes and dried lines of tears on the cheeks replaced bone-tired and weary. Martha tiptoed up to the window. Inside, her grandfather sat in his chair, reading the paper, smoking. Her grandmother was nowhere to be found.

"Honey, come inside." Her mother had woken. She smiled calmly, no sign of anger, that would come later once the situation sank in to mingle with the fear Julie had felt throughout the day.

"Well, squirt, how was your constitutional? Did you have a bit of a French leave?" Her grandfather's voice sounded like the smoke from a pipe smells: rich, heavy, smooth, but Martha could hear relief, an unraveling of tightness that had been building all day. When she heard the relief in his voice, she looked at her sneakers, trying not to cry, trying to clear the fact she'd scared them out of her mind. "We missed you. Your grandma went on a trip, too."

"Yes, honey, she had to go to the hospital. She's sick, but she will be okay. Do you remember when Great-Grandpa died and she got sick? This is like that," Julie soothed her child, sliding her mother-voice over her child like a warm milk bath.

Martha just nodded, then sat beside her mother. She felt her throat tightening, the tears beginning again, the guilt bubbling up to the surface. She thought about the afghan and decided to throw away her scissors. She didn't need them anymore.

"Come inside, honey. We'll get ready for bed. Tomorrow, we are having dinner at Sue's house; won't that be fun?"

"Okay, mom. That sounds great," Martha croaked.

Camelot

by Carmela Orsini

"Hey, Artie, got any plans this weekend?" Tristan had asked him at the office that Tuesday. Of course he didn't, and Tristan knew it before he ever asked. The group of men sat hovelled around files, calculators, and guidebooks. Tax time is always crazy for an accountant, and these guys could see the light at the end of the tunnel.

"No, no…I don't think I have anything for sure, you know."

Lance had walked into the cubicle, high-fiving Arthur, like everyone always did. "Did I hear you say that you're free this weekend, pal?"

"Yes."

Lance strutted into his leather seat between Tristan and Arthur. "Well, my friend, there's this girl over in marketing that's been asking us about you. Gavin, you know her?"

"No, I don't believe so."

A broad smile stretched over Tristan's face. "Oh, man. She's great. Maybe we can hook you two up this weekend – you know…blow off all the steam we've worked up this week. You'd have a great time. Whaddya say?"

"Yeah, and she's dying to meet you, Artie," Percy agreed from the coffee maker in the corner.

Arthur smiled, a little shocked at his coworker's enthusiasm for his sake. *They know,* he thought, *they know my longing to find my one true love and sweep her off her feet, just like in the fairy tales. They're looking out for me, trying to help me along on my quest. Gavin: the blind date of my life!* He could tell just by her name that he would love her.

"Are you sure it's *me* she was asking about?"

"Would we lie to you about something like this? I'm telling you, she's dying to meet you." Tristan always was a good young man, very clean.

"Do you know that French place downtown? She loves French food." Percy came from a nice family.

"Easy, guys, I don't know if Artie's got that type of money. What do you say Art?" Everyone loved Lance.

"If you guys think she's worth it, I can manange. Yes, I'll manage just fine."

"That a'boy, Artie. I knew you'd have it in you."

. . .

Arthur rushed home from Landerson Financial Advisory that Friday, one day after the famous April tax deadline. Most of the guys he worked with were temps or interns or entry-level with plans for the big time. Arthur was past that at this point. Too old to be an intern, too young to be the bigwig sitting pretty at the top. His large frame could have been intimidating, but his quite demeanor counter balanced his presence. But he always smiled. Not confidently, but smile he did. Not much got to him on the surface.

I won't call Mother tonight. She'll get over it – that'll give me a few extra minutes. Can't be late. Arthur climbed the stairs to his third floor apartment, searching for his keys lost in his coat pocket. He placed his briefcase on the island in the kitchen and watered his plant next to the sink. That plant had been with him for two and a half years – ever since those weird people moved into the apartment next to his and started making everything smell funny.

Aren't you supposed to name your plant? I should name my plant. He almost reached out to pet the leaves but pulled his hand back just before it had the chance to make contact. He chuckled at his gesture. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of a piece of paper protruding from his briefcase. *Odd,* he thought. Carefully lifting the latches on each side, Arthur proceeded with a hint of excitement. The paper, he discovered, was a black and white photocopy of Richard Simmons with Arthur's face superimposed over the head. Richard, or Arthur, rather, dawned a tight, striped tank top and short shorts, which accentuated the falsely enlarged pouch between the man's legs. Someone had taken a red Sharpie to the picture. "Didn't know you had it in you, Artie!" Arrows pointing the inappropriateness. He stared at the image from his over-worked coworkers, torn as to what to do with it. Part of him wanted to rip it to pieces and burn the shreds. Instead, he hung the image on his empty refrigerator and proceeded to get ready for his blind date.

Before leaving, he stole one quick look in the mirror. In spite his best efforts, Arthur's collared shirt and plaid tie screamed straight from the office and his navy blazer was a size too small. His thick glasses resting awkwardly on a round, broad nose didn't help. His whole ensemble was quite inappropriate for such

"Café," Apokalyptik, Digital Print

a fancy French restaurant filled with black ties, black dresses, and white tablecloths. Fine dining was foreign to his type. But Arthur went, regardless. He could just as easily have been at work. His large thigh shook his leg nervously under the little table, making the glow from the candle cast dark shadows over the wall next to him. He reached a hand to his thinning curly hair – giving it a little pat. No gray, thank God. Just a little thin, that's all.

"Won't be long now," he whispered to himself as the waitress approached his table. "Uh, miss, I've decided on a wine for my special lady friend and myself. I think I'll go with the house suggestion of the La Mission Haut Brion 1990 Pinot Noir. Spare no cost for my lady friend." The waitress gave a grin. *Of course she would. I just ordered a three hundred dollar bottle of wine.* If he was ordering for his wife, he might have been cute, but he wasn't ordering for his wife. He pulled out his wallet and grabbed one of his business cards. When he started at Landerson's Financial Advisory eleven years earlier, straight out of school, they had ordered him five hundred business cards. He mailed one to his mom, kept a dozen in a rack on his desk and a few in his wallet. The other 469 of them rested in their original box in the top drawer of his filing cabinet. He was secure and comfortable in his little job – no threat of being replaced, but no hope of a raise. He wrote his home phone number on the back of the card in his best handwriting with his black felt pen. After approving the work, he tucked it in his shirt pocket and nodded his head with a smile.

Yes, tonight would be the night he would find his soul mate. It didn't matter that he couldn't really afford the outrageous prices at Chez Français: his lady would surely be worth every penny. He would spend every dime and every breath he had for her, this woman he has created in his mind—an illusion fabricated from the tales of his co-workers. The waitress returned with the wine, opening it and replacing the cork.

"Thank you."

Arthur picked up his menu, filled with words that meant little to him. Fish, not steak. Steak would be too uncouth with his fancy wine. "French. I wish I spoke French. Then, I could actually pronounce what I'm ordering. Wouldn't that be something?" Arthur chuckled to himself. He glanced at his watch. She was fashionably late. Of course she was. His lady had to be fashionable. Thirty minutes is far more than fashion-

able. *Should I wait to pour the wine until she gets here? I'm awful thirsty now, and that little taste the waitress gave me was such a tease. No, what am I saying. Of course I can wait. If she got here and saw I already drank her bottle of wine, she'd turn right back around and leave.*

Arthur quickly downed his decorative glass of water, little dribbles dampening his tie in between his large gulps. Sweat drops were slowly starting to appear on his broad forehead. An old distinguished gentleman crossed the dance floor and sat at the piano, smoothly removing his white gloves. The tune, although quite foreign to Arthur, pleased him nonetheless. Tapping his fingers to the rhythm, although off slightly, calmed his nerves, but the sweat stains could not be stopped from forming. Small rings were beginning to penetrate his underarms. Smaller drops were faintly noticeable on his back, despite the protection of his coat.

Without thinking, Arthur reached across the table and snatched the glass of water in front of the other seat. He downed it with as much fortitude as he had the first. A small drop of sweat rolled down his face. His tongue rudely reached towards it. *Perhaps I'll have just one glass of wine. If I'm sipping the wine then it might look like I've done this before, like I'm suave and collected.*

The cork was stuck. Arthur resorted to his napkin to help him pull it out, spilling a few of the dark contents onto his white table cloth. *Just one glass.* His moist hand reached for the wine glass in front of him but wavered. The red liquid spilt into his empty water glass. *It still only counts as one. I guess I'm more nervous than I thought.*

He checked his watch again. The nine o'clock hour approached like a bad omen. *An hour late. She could be lost. Or worse. What if she got hurt in some sort of accident? Or maybe there was some sort of emergency. Surely Tristan and the other guys would have given her my cell number. She would call if there was a problem.* The pianist began playing a tune Arthur recognized. His kid sister obsessed over Fredrick Chopin. The quartet for her wedding played *A Nocturne* as an overture. Morbid, but soothingly unnoticeable. Arthur poured another water glass of wine. The waitress returned.

"No, thank you, miss, I'm not ready to order," Arthur rushed.

"Excuse me, sir. I apologize for interrupting, but the gentlemen at that table over there asked me to give you this." She pointed across the dance floor to a larger table. Arthur gasped as Tristan, Percy, and Lance waved at him jovially. She placed a white note card on the table and left. Arthur could feel his heart beat against his temple. His sweaty hand tried not to shake as he picked the card up to read, hoping not to look too frazzled in front of the guys:

Artie! Hope you liked our little joke. Why don't you come over and join us? We'll even buy you another bottle. ~The Guys.

Once again, Arthur played the fool. A jester in a court of young, rich princes with nothing more to do than torment him. He read the note four times. He watched the guys happy smiles turn to looks of concern. He threw some money on the table, grabbed his bottle of wine, and walked out the door in search of a cab.

. . .

The neon yellow of the Waffle House sign reflected in Arthur's glasses. *I wonder, is this the Waffle House out by the interstate or that one over on Tribuit Street?*

"You can let me off here." The cab stopped and Arthur paid. He was pretty sure he left an excessively large tip, but he didn't have the energy to argue with himself. He tried to take a step forward, but his leg gave way a little. He couldn't hold red wine like he could ten years ago.

"Welcome to Waffle House." The third shift's unenthusiastic. With a wave of his hand, Arthur landed hard into the first booth he came. Without thinking he grabbed the ashtray at the end of the table and flipped it over repeatedly in his hand, refusing to yield his eyes from its glare.

"Hi, I'm Ginger. I'll be your waitress. Are you ready to order?"

Good God, this girl talks way too fast. "Just coffee for now thanks. Regular with lots of cream." He refused to look up. She walked away as bored as she had approached. "Lots of cream," he repeated to himself. His fingertips drummed the bottom of the ashtray. *I should have been a smoker. Smokers wouldn't let people push them around, like some dumb idiot –*

A gloriously adorned hand with perfectly manicured fingernails reached across his line of vision interrupting his thought. The hand carrying a plain mug retracted only to return once more with a hand full of cream. Lots of cream. Two large gold rings, one with a green jewel, and one with a turquoise gem, graced her thumb and forefinger. Her bright red fingernail polish screamed, "I'm not really a waitress." Seven gold jangles clanked at her wrists. Clank. Clank. Beautiful. Harmonious. Her skin, the color of his cream. He couldn't help but stare at it and nothing else as the hand retracted to a uniformed hem.

Arthur's hand flinched. He wanted to grab that glorious hand and hold it tenderly. Kiss it - as a knight would have when he greeted his lady in waiting. Gavin who? His one true love was being held captive by the night shift at the Waffle House. Arthur was her knight in shinning armor, ready to rescue her from her evil captors.

"You gonna want anything else?"

Arthur's eyes could not move from her hand. *Stall, keep her coming back. You love her.* "Yes, as a matter of fact, I would love a glass of chocolate milk as well, please."

She turned without a word. That hand, no, that hand must return. *It will, you fool. She must get the drink you ordered. A cigarette, a cigarette would impress her. Make me more mysterious. With the long, white stick hanging from my lips at a funny angle. Like I've got something heavy on mind or some stress that can only be eased by a puff. It'd give me a real hard edge. Show her I'm not as soft as I look.*

The hand returned with the clear glass of brown. This time, she said nothing. Arthur moved his glaze up her arm, toned but not muscular. Perfect.

"Uh, Ginger was it? Can I trouble you for some toast as well?"

"Anything else."

"Well, no, I suppose toast will just about cover it. Thank you."

She left quickly. Toast would clearly delay her a few moments longer than the drinks had, so Arthur distracted himself with his coffee. His pudgy little fingers picked up a cream and smoothly decapitated it, spilling its contents into the murky waters. And then another. And another. And another, until all the creams Lady Ginger had brought him had served their sentence. He thought he was angry with the gang from work, but the helpless little creams seemed to release the stress. Both the mug of coffee and the glass of chocolate milk were filled to the rim, threatening to overflow. *Can't have this.* He carefully brought each glass to the edge of the table and leaned his head down until his lips were on the rim of the chocolate milk.

"Um, here's your toast."

He straightened up too quickly, certainly beyond disgraced, too embarrassed to look in her direction. His ears lit up, turning as red as her beautiful fingernails. Her bracelets jangled as she reached in front of him with the little plate. Their ringing hit him like a light bulb. He'll show those jerks at work. He'll come in with stories of his real hot date – Ginger, the veela from Waffle House. *They think they're so cute, what would they do if they saw me with her?* Yes, he, Arthur, would prove they could not get to him. He could be in on the joke. He could love her like he loved her hand, even if it were for one night.

"Will this be all?"

"For now, yes ma'am. Thank you." *No, don't let this be her last look. You must get her attention. But you can't possibly order anything else now. You just said you didn't need anything else. Think, Arthur. Think. Make eye contact. Look at her face at least. No. You big coward. Just finish your coffee and go home. Don't stoop to this level.*

Arthur obediently began sipping his cream filled mug. The ashtray stared at him mockingly. "Yes, I know." The coffee did not warm his throat, did not stop his large thigh from shaking beneath the table, did not ease the heavy weight in his stomach. Yet Arthur drank, he drank with as much gusto as he had with the three hundred dollar bottle of wine earlier that night. A dollar twenty, three hundred dollars, made no difference now. He glanced down the line of tables. A grizzled, elderly man sat at the bar in dirty overalls and a hunting cap, great mobs of gray hair poking out from underneath the dirty hat. His nose was too crooked for his face, but it matched his teeth quite nicely. His hands shook a little with each bite of waffle he brought to his dried out lips. He was tan, wrinkled, smelly, and remarkable. *Everything I'll never be. No one could trick him like they trick me.*

"More coffee?"

What? Can this be? She returns on her own free will.

"Yes, please."

"And cream?"

"When you get the chance, it's not important."

"Sure, no prob."

"Can I trouble you for some breakfast?" He turned back to the hand on the hip, moving this time past the niceness of her arm, towards the plump, yet firm chest hiding behind the dirty buttoned up Waffle House shirt.

"Uh, yeah, that's what I'm here for."

"Yes, yes. Of course. Forgive me. How about that All-Star Breakfast combo? With scrambled eggs, not fried." He was captivated by the image.

"Bacon or sausage?"

"How about both?" Both indeed.

"Sure." As she turned to leave, Arthur caught a glimpse of the other key body part. Perfect, yet again. He smiled and turned back to his ash tray.

"Geenger, bring me another one of them little cartons of milk, will ya girl?" the old man's voice graveled.

"Sure, sweetie. Being adventurous tonight aren't you?"

"I have to come home with something on my breath or Nina will think I weren't out with some pretty little thing."

"You mean you tell her about me?"

"Girl, she told me to invite her to the weddin." The old man chuckled with difficulty. Arthur's revenge laughed back.

Enraged, Arthur devoured his toast, unaware of his own famine. He was betrayed. Besides, he had not eaten dinner. He had no chance. She was sweet and flirted with older men that possessed all the qualities Arthur knew did not exists within himself. *I'm just a fool. I'll always be the butt of the joke.*

Ginger returned to his table with the combo. He turned his head, unable to look at her gorgeous hand. He just stared at his new rival. His hangover began to set in already. "Need anything else?"

"Not right now," he said coolly. As soon as her footsteps had lessened in his ears, Arthur tore into his food. He didn't stop to syrup the waffle; he didn't stop to pepper the eggs; he didn't stop to butter the toast. He ate like a madman, though he felt sick. For every slow, shaky bite the old man forced to his lips, Arthur took ten. He ate until there was nothing left.

"Wow, you must have been really hungry!"

"Yes, I was. Two more waffles, please."

"Okay." He still could not look at her. His gaze could not let go of the old man. He just wanted to eat and eat and eat until he exploded. Then he would go home and finally name his damn plant, finally become the pathetic being his friends wanted him to be, finally stoop to the old, lonely crazy man – having never known his own true love.

The old man started pulling dollar bills out of his scruffy plastic wallet. He had not waited for a check. He knew his order well. The five one-dollar bills stood remarkably on their side just as he had tossed them down. Simply putting his wallet back in his pocket was a momentous task for his old hands. He reached over and grabbed his cane that had been hanging on the stool next to his.

"So long Ray, Burt, Geenger. I'll see y'all tomorrow night."

Two men replied various remarks of "See ya, Merle." "Bye, Merle."

"Play me a good one on your way out, sweetie," Ginger's voice hung in the air like the scent of perfume amongst all the grease.

"You know I will."

The old mans legs stepped just a few inches in front of one another. As he passed Arthur's table, the old man gave him a wink and a little wave, tapping his cane loudly on the floor with the other hand. By the time he reached the jukebox by the door, Ginger had cleared the money and dishes and wiped the surface clean. Arthur couldn't watch him anymore. He returned his attention to the ashtray. The music started and the bells on the door jingled, signifying his enemy's departure from the scene. *What the hell was that little wink thing about? Who does he think he is? At least he played a good song; I love Bruce Springsteen.*

"Okay, here are your waffles. Are you going to order anything else?"

"No, this will do it."

"Well, I brought your check. Do you mind paying out? I can't take my cigarette break until all my customers have paid."

The jukebox sang, *"I just can't face my self alone again."*

Arthur started sweating all over again. His heart pounded at his temples, in his ears, in his throat. He felt a new wave of confidence, but he couldn't tell if it was from the old man's wink or the fact that the old man was now gone. *Be brave, Arthur. You need to do this. What will those guys do to you if you don't! You can't be pathetic forever. Enough.* "How about this? If I pay now, then you lend me a cigarette and let me join you on your break." *Are you insane! You sound like a babbling fool. Besides, a cigarette, you'll just go out there and make a fool of yourself. She just thinks you're some dumb customer, Arthur.*

"Sure, I guess." *Could it be…*Arthur stared out the door for a few moments, unable to move for his shock. The old man was inching his way down a dirt road just beyond the sidewalk encircling the parking lot.

"Alright, how much do I owe you?"

"$18.43." *How the hell does one person spend eighteen dollars at a Waffle House?* He could hear her tapping her foot to the music.

"You ain't a beauty but, yeah, you're alright, and that's alright with me."

Arthur moved his glance from her hand to her face for the first time. My god, she was beautiful. Her dazzling red hair was styled frizzy beyond any point of natural. Her long, thin eyebrows arched like the back of a scared cat with a cute little mole just under her left eye. The red from her fingernails echoed in the red of her lips. Purple eye shadow and bright pink blush stained her creamy skin. And then she smiled at him. Her parted lips revealed the most glamorous smile in the whole restaurant. She had the face of a celebrity – a Garbo sitting in a diner just waiting to be discovered, and Arthur was feeling like an explorer. Without lowering his stare, Arthur pulled out his wallet and handed her one of the fifties he had planned to use for Gavin.

"Keep the change," he said with out a thought. She was truly spectacular. What a story she would make.

"Geez, thanks, mister." She could be bought, if it came to that. She had her price. She would be worth it, too.

"Sure. No problem."

"The door's open but the ride ain't free." Arthur thought back to the beginning of the night. He saw Richard with a fake penis and his face. He saw his plant, his only companion in an empty room. He saw his clean, little apartment. The white tablecloths. The red wine. The three hundred dollars he spent there. Tristan's teeth as he smiled. Percy's head turning red from laughter. Lance waving politely. The yellow cab. The yellow Waffle House sign. The red fingernails. The red lips. His fifty he spent here.

"Is menthol okay? That's all I have."

Arthur took a sip of his cream filled chocolate milk. He turned from her to look at the door. About a quarter a mile down the road, he could see the old man struggling towards home. He looked at the bells on the door. Then at the jukebox. He brought his hands together and rubbed his palms. He wasn't sweating anymore. He had lost so much already that night, money the least of his losses. He suddenly felt the urge to talk to Merle. How could he come here every night and face this life? It was a lesson Arthur was willing to learn. He had lost a lot, alright. But for the first time in a long time, he didn't feel like a loser.

"It's a town of losers. We're pulling out of here to win."

"Actually, Ginger. I don't smoke." With a burst, he was out the door, the bells clattering loudly against the glass. He ran as fast and awkwardly as he could towards the old man, nearly stumbling to the ground just past the parking lot. As he reached the dirt road, he started calling.

"Hey, excuse me." He was breathing heavily, gasping for enough air to call out. "Sir, excuse me."

Merle stopped, turned to face Arthur, and smiled and toothless grin. Arthur stopped just short of where the old man stood and bent over, grabbing his knees and gasping for breath. Merle just brought his cane together, grasping it gently with both hands, waiting patiently.

Still struggling, Arthur stood up slowly. He reached a hand over to the old man's hands, using the cane for support.

"I just have to ask – do you regret it? Do you feel like you missed anything by not selling out? I gotta know." Arthur could stand now, on his own.

The old man turned back down the road and began walking, Arthur trudging along just at his heels. Merle tuned and said with confidence, "Young man, you're going to be just fine." And the two men struggled side by side down the seldom-used road, each journeying home.

"No Parking," Apokalyptik, Digital Print

The Case of the Rotten Potato

by Dave Williams

When I was a kid this would have seemed like a dream job. Nearly every day some goofy looking teenager comes in here and asks for an application. "Uh…is y'all hiring?" We aren't hiring of course. It really doesn't take much to keep this place running. Everything kind of works on its own. I have actually left hours early without anyone ever figuring it out. Then that bell rings. They say that soldiers, after returning from war can still hear the gunshots or the bombs exploding. This is how I feel about that God forsaken bell. It isn't so much a bell as an electronic whistling sound. If there is an actual gate to Hell, this would be the doorbell. REEE-REEE-REEE!!! The tone has to be louder and higher pitched than the other machines to ensure that it is heard over everything else and that is quite an accomplishment in this place. If Satan has an alarm clock this is what it sounds like.

The noise, that noise, will eventually be the death of me. I have been working in this place for nearly a year now and I still haven't gotten used to it. Of course the headaches are a little less frequent now, but I still wake up in the middle of the night hearing those sounds. The beeps, the bells, and the blasts. How could anyone ever get used to this? I come here six days a week and hide out in my little room, away from all of the beeps, the bells, and the blasts. One positive aspect of working here is that it has gotten me even deeper into music. I play CDs at full volume just to drown out that God-awful noise. I listen to music and read. I have read more in the past year than I read in the first twenty-three years of my life combined. So it isn't all bad, just most of it.

The mall is often packed on Saturdays, so that is when we are most crowded, especially around the holidays. Teenagers in ridiculous hip-hop clothes encircle the dancing game like vultures around a fallen gazelle. This game wasn't around when I was their age so I really don't understand the draw. People look so stupid when they dance. That is why most people do it in dark nightclubs and not in the middle of a bright neon-lit arcade. Still, they circle that thing in groups ranging from four to thirty, depending on what time of day, every single day. It costs them fifty cents to dance twice. Some of these kids must spend up to fifty bucks in here on any given day. These machines aren't cheap. They say that children are our future. Well, the future looks pretty bleak.

Often fathers bring their children in, either when Mommy is shopping, or when Daddy has weekend custody. The fathers gravitate towards skee-ball or air hockey. They were born in a much simpler time, but the kids want to dance or ride simulated race horses. Some fathers are dignified and play video games with their children to win tickets and buy toys. These are the fathers who rarely give me much trouble. They are content to spend quality time with the fruits of their loins, but then there are the other kinds of fathers. These fathers give their children eight tokens each and keep twenty for themselves. REEE-REEE-REEE!!! "Yo, that football game ate my token." There have been so many moments when I wanted to grab these men by their faces and say, "If you were throwing a real football outside, you wouldn't have these problems and your children might not end up as brain dead as you." They pose as loving fathers, enjoying their children's interest, but they are really just full-grown children wasting my time. Their kids are the kids that grow up to be the guys talking on a cell phones in the movie theater, or the ladies in the front of the checkout line who refuse to accept that a coupon has expired. These are the morons of the future.

Then there are the mothers who just didn't know when to quit. They walk in with seven kids, probably each with his or her own missing paternal influence. It never fails that one of these little rug rats tries to rip me off. REEE-REEE-REEE!!! "That clown game took my twenty dollars." Then their younger, stickier sibling corroborates immediately, "Yeah, it took ten from me." When I first started I would grant any request as long as they would leave me alone, but lately I have found that confronting ten-year-olds and catching them in their lies is a great way to pass the time. "Kid, that clown game has been unplugged since Ronald Reagan was in office. If you put twenty bucks in there, you deserved to lose it." This only makes me happy for a short period of time because, within seconds, here comes Big Mama. "Sir." Using a formal address like "Sir" is intended to prove that this woman is indeed high class and not just some bloated baby factory looking for a new way to ignore her many, many kids while she shops for a brand new pair of soon to be stained sweatpants. It isn't all her fault though. Somewhere there are seven dead beat dads who were once desperate enough to buy her a bottle of Boons Farm and spend ten to thirty minutes alone with her. "That machine took my daughter's tokens and she wants them back." It is one thing when a kid tries to get a free game. It simply means that they are mischievous; lots of kids are like that. However, It is truly pathetic when a middle aged woman tries to rip off a video game arcade for quarters. These are the women in my life.

We also have regulars. Bars have regulars. It would be quite the sociological experiment to find out

how many arcade regulars become bar regulars later on in life. How many make the transition from simply numbing their brains into actually killing them? I used to work at a bar where the same ten guys came in everyday for happy hour. Arcade regulars come in every day, but there is no happy hour. In my opinion, every hour is as miserable as the next. Our regulars play the fighting games. Four or five of them at a time surround the screen and cheer each other on. A couple of times I have had to break up an actual fight, which wasn't extremely hard, since the only parts of their bodies that received any exercise at all were their fingers and wrists. On the nights that I was forced to work a double shift and close the place, they wouldn't leave until I turned off the games. These zombies sat there playing these ridiculous fighting games until I shut off the lights. Then they simultaneously yelled "AWWW." When I was their age I was out partying and trying to get laid. These guys are standing around in a distant corner of the mall tapping buttons and talking trash. My two employees are both regulars. They were just regulars who happened to get a job. The only difference between them and the other four guys sitting around the machine is that they are making six dollars every hour. I truly pitied these people. Though, as time has passed, I really don't think that I am much different than them at all. They are people just like you and me. They have the same wants and needs as most of us. They have dreams and aspirations. It is just that they like to watch cartoon characters beat each other silly for five hours a day every day.

No matter how hard I fought it, I had to concede to the fact that I was no better than any of these freaks. It is funny how, as a kid in Sunday school, I learned to "Judge not lest ye be judged," yet churches are gossip central. The preacher may be saying "Judge not lest ye be judged," but the conversations in the pews are all about how Mrs. Johnson's hat looks tacky, or "That is Loretta's fourth husband. Bless her heart." I received far too many mixed moral messages growing up, so I had to figure it out for myself. I saw it as a choice. I could have judged not and not been judged, but I decided to go with judge and be judged. It just seemed a lot more natural. So, I look at my customers as drooling idiots, with the occasional psychopath mixed in, and they look at me as the creepy, surly, ever fattening, loser managing the arcade. The situation isn't pretty, but there is a comfort in its bitter honesty.

"Untitled," Elizabeth Bedell, Acrylic

I used to be such a kindhearted person. I loved people. I respected people. I truly cared for my fellow human beings. After working here for a while, I am beginning to loathe humanity and it scares me. The next thing you know I will be voting Republican. Every once in a blue moon a sweet family will walk in. I'll stand there like a stalker and watch them play. The children aren't very familiar with the controls and the parents usually stick to skee-ball. I used to be around people like them all of the time instead of the cross eyed, brain dead lot that surrounds me these days. The only problem is that they never stick around. They play a couple of games and then they are gone. They are off to go play outside or visit their grandmother, or whatever it is that healthy, happy, respectable, American families do on a Saturday afternoon. I miss normal people. I miss people who read magazines that aren't about gaming and shower once a day.

Todd doesn't look like he puts too much stock into personal hygiene. Todd is one of my regulars and I have grown a wee bit fond of him in many ways. The way that someone in solitary confinement would become fond of a cockroach. Todd is twenty years old and works at a fast food joint across the street. Some days he brings in a bag full of burgers and offers me some. Most of the time I am repulsed by the idea of actually ingesting anything that sweaty Todd put his hands on, but when I am really hungry I take a chicken sandwich. I hope that I don't come off as being too harsh when I say that Todd is one of our future homeless members of society. He is quite convincing when he begs for a free game and he has this preacher quality to his speech. Todd couldn't really be a preacher because he mumbles his words like Dustin Hoffman's character in "Dick Tracy," but I can definitely picture him downtown in fifteen years pestering tourists. "Ma'am, I…I…I'm a good Christian man. I just need a couple of dollars to get something to eat." Maybe this won't happen because Todd does go to college.

I'll bet that one of his sweetheart grandparents had blown all of their hard earned savings to send him to our local college and he ditches class everyday to come here and play video games. One afternoon, when I had read an especially heart wrenching article about *Brown V the Board Of Education*, in the New Yorker, I actually gave Todd a long winded speech about how great it was that he was in school and how important it was that he cherished it and did a good job. After this conversation I was quite proud of young Todd and for a while there I had a newfound faith in humanity. It felt like the ending of an after school special. Then, later on that week, I was slightly disappointed when he handed me a sheet to fill out concerning one of his classes. Apparently, as a project, his class had to be involved in some kind of community service project. They could volunteer at the library, or work at the humane society walking the dogs. They could help build houses with Habitat For Humanity. They could even volunteer at their own church. So, Todd asked me if I would fill out a form that logged all of the hours of "community service" that he had done here at the arcade. "Man, you know I is always helping you move machines around and stuff. I gave him a long and disgusted look, filled out the form, and went back in to my room to listen to the Shins. Good luck finding adequate shelter in fifteen years Todd. The winters can be quite brisk.

My other favorite regular is a sixteen year old kid named Jeremy. Jeremy is really into the dancing game but he still plays the fighting games whenever the mood strikes him. I knew kids like Jeremy growing up, hip hop kids who walked around the mall hitting on teen-age girls and giving out high fives left and right. For me, that kid was Craig Tolbert. He wore baggy clothes and had grotesque acne. Craig was about sixteen when I was twelve, and he would stroll around the mall all day in a gang of cigarette smoking pre-teens, shoplifting and hustling in the arcade. Craig still haunts the mall in my hometown, but now he manages the arcade. Don't think that the irony in that last sentence escapes me. I get it alright. I'm a loser just like him. Whatever, shut up.

Jeremy startled me in my first week at work by being extremely forward. He would walk into my back room and tell me about his mall adventures. I would usually sit there and read while he went on and on about who got jumped and who couldn't dance. I thought that if I ignored him that he would go away, but that never happened. Every day Jeremy would walk in and hang out in the back room, talking about teen-agers and shoplifting. Some of his stories were quite compelling and after a while I would actually miss him on the days that he did not come by. Jeremy had been expelled from school for fighting, so he really had no other place to be. He would hop a bus from his grandma's place everyday and come hang out with me. I started to look at Jeremy as some kind of weird juvenile delinquent little brother that I had to look out for. I would hand him the keys to the games and let him do my job on Saturdays. It really worked out great for the both of us. He could impress all of his little friends by playing free games and I could go into the back and sleep off my hangover.

I am twenty four years old and I manage the arcade in the mall. I have to be here seven days a week. On Tuesdays I do collections. I have to be here at six in the morning to crack open all of the machines and count all of the tokens from the previous week. That noise is not something that you want to hear ever, let alone at six in the morning. I count all of the tokens and then I go to the bank. The only reason that I have

not been fired yet is that no one else, outside of teen-age creeps, would ever take this job. The last two managers were caught stealing within a month of being hired. One of them was selling weed out of the back. Oddly enough, working at a video game arcade is appealing to people who smoke marijuana. Imagine that.

My boss is the regional general manager. I think that he is Indian, but I have not yet been able to get an honest answer out of him. Out of pointless, obsessive curiosity, I have been trying to pin down where he was born. Once, on a truck ride to a hardware store, he mentioned that his father was from the Caribbean. I once knew a girl from Barbados who had very Indian features and an Indian accent. Every time I see Maurice I ask sly questions like, "Will you be going home for the holiday? How long is the flight?" and, "Y'all must have terribly hot summers, huh?" I could just ask him, but where is the fun in that? His name is Maurice, so maybe he's French. Isn't Maurice a French name? Maurice Chevallier, he was French right?

Maurice pops in every once in a while to see how I'm doing and help me fix the machines. On Tuesdays he comes by to check my numbers for the week. At first he would drop by to help out, but lately he has been popping in just to catch me sleeping. His accent has become unbearable. I'm no racist, so I won't let my hatred of the sound of Maurice's voice initiate a sweeping hatred for all people of western Asian descent, but I hate the sound of that man's voice. "Timothy, what are you doing?" Are you back here sleeping, man?" He knows the answer to that question. He shouldn't have to ask. "I pay you to manage this store and you are back here reading and listening to music." This isn't a store. This is Hell, and you sir are beginning to look like you are growing horns. "These games are falling apart, man. You should put down the magazine and go fix the games." I would love to Maurice, it is just that if I turn off this CD player and walk outside onto the arcade floor and hear that noise, those beeps, and bells, and blasts, I might lose my mind and end up pistol whipping a thirteen year old Eminem fan with a plastic gun. Maurice doesn't seem to mind the noise and those awful lights. He could sit around the arcade all day with a screwdriver and a set of keys. I, on the other hand, wish I was dead after only ten minutes. Maybe it is a cultural thing.

Maurice is going through a divorce and where, at first I felt sorry for him, now I find it hilarious. Sure, it makes him crabby, but I kind of enjoy those days when he comes in and yells at me because I get to yell back and most days I need to blow off some steam. He can't fire me since I am the first manager that he has had in two years that doesn't steal. The story is that his wife began seeing another man nearly a year ago and now she wants a divorce. They have two teen-age daughters and he remains in close contact with her. He is trying to win her back. One thing that is certain about Maurice is that he loves the ladies. On Tuesdays when he comes by and we are not yelling at each other he likes to tell me all about his personal life. "I watch a lot of porno movies to pick up new moves, man. My wife she knows that no one is better, because I know new moves." The combination of his accent and the ridiculous things that he says makes him one of the most entertaining people that I have ever met. If he could learn to leave me alone more often we could really get along.

Todd once told me that he stood outside of the mall entrance with Maurice once and watched him work. Apparently, Maurice believes that the best way to meet women is to stare at them and then do that hissing thing to get their attention. "Psssttt," this is his intro. Todd didn't make clear whether this actually worked or not, but I don't see how it couldn't. A forty three year old arcade manager "psssstttt" ing at fourteen through twenty year old girls at the entrance to the mall. If that isn't a recipe for sexual success I don't know what is. His wife is divorcing him and he has no chance of meeting anyone else.

The reason that she is leaving him is pretty obvious. It's funny how we can never understand what goes wrong in our lives when it is so obvious to everyone around us. We just can't see what makes us the jerks that we are when it is pretty clear to the rest of the world. All Maurice would have to do is ask me just once, "Timothy, why is my wife leaving me, man?" I would reply, "Well Maurice, you are a pigheaded control freak with a short temper and you watch a lot of porno. Try being a little nicer and cleaning out your underwear drawer and you just might reconcile." The hilarity is that his wife and this man were only friends when Maurice found out. The two of them had only had lunch together once. Maurice found out about it and he went crazy. He began treating his wife like dirt and calling her names, in that awful accent no less, in front of their kids. She probably wanted to leave him before that because he is an idiot who listens to Christmas music and wears windbreaker jumpsuits. Still, she probably wouldn't have cheated on him if he had not become such a jerk. I would have left him too. Strike that. I never would have married him in the first place. Unless... Wait... What are the laws like in Massachusetts again?

The guy is a wreck and he takes it out on me. I don't mind so much. Maurice's visits are the pepper in my otherwise bland Caesar salad of a life. Binge drinking helps out a lot too. The guy busts in every once in a while and gives me a tongue lashing. He threatens to fire me sometimes but I know that he is bluffing.

What Maurice doesn't understand is that this place doesn't need me. This place doesn't even need him. The arcade will make just as much money whether I am even present or not. Brain dead teens and

children will drop coins in the slots just as long as there is a light on the other end. They react like moths to a flame. They don't need me. They don't need him. They don't even need their parents. All they need are quarters, fingers, and simulated violence and they will be happy for the rest of their lives. I have never seen "The Matrix," but I think that was sort of what it was about, a bunch of idiots hooked up to machines. Maybe I should rent that sometime.

Todd and Maurice have gotten pretty tight in the past few months. One night after closing, Maurice came by with a new game strapped to the back of his truck and Todd stuck around to help us move it in. I couldn't have cared less either way, but Maurice must have seen something special in that big fat rhinoceros, so he offered him a job. I wasn't upset that I would be working with Todd. I really didn't care at all. I knew that there was a twelve pack and an episode of "Jerry Springer" waiting for me at home so I agreed that Todd should be hired at once. Lately, Maurice has been inviting Todd to join him on his trips to Orlando and Jacksonville, which are the other arcades in his region. I could just picture the expressions on Todd's face as Maurice tells him lurid details of his once great sex life on those long car rides in to Florida: "That position is called the Friendly Assassin, man."

All of this back story is really just preface to what happened to me today. It was a day like any other. I woke up with a splitting headache and beer spilled all over the carpet. The little television that I keep beside my bed had fallen over and cracked just a bit on the right side of the screen. I rolled out of bed and lit a cigarette, then tossed on my jeans and a t-shirt before hopping in the car and stumbling in to work. Showering is for people who want to be alive. Maurice was there to meet me at the door. He had come in early to check the safe, just to make sure that I wasn't stealing. He really wants to fire me. "What's up Maurice?" The guy rarely looks at me when we talk to each other, he just kind of runs around like a rat after the smell of distant vomit. Maurice jumps right in, "It stinks in here, man." I shouldn't have expected a greeting. To be treated with respect is not a part of the arcade community. "You need to go behind the games and sweep up today." I told him that I would so that he would go away, then I turned on that awful noise, opened the gate, and locked myself in the back room to take a nap.

REEE-REEE-REEE!!! No, not now, please don't let this be a customer. I opened up the door and it was Jeremy. "Whassup, man?" He peers in the room and walks right past me. This has been our routine nearly every day for the past year and I am kind of glad to see him. "Listen Jeremy, I've got a pretty bad headache. Do you think that you could mind the store for me today?" I toss him my keys and his face lights up. Jeremy's fashion sense is remarkable. He wears these gigantic black pants that you find in the goth store here at the mall. Usually, he has on a wife beater or jersey and then a skull cap under a baby blue hat that has Eminem's logo on it. Eminem was the best thing that ever happened to young Jeremy. He validated his lifestyle somehow and made it alright to be who he is. No more must boys like Jeremy receive that classic tag of Vanilla Ice.

Jeremy was more than happy to do my job for me after I listened to him tell a story about a twelve year old girl that he has been dating. I don't think that they date. They just walk around the mall together. They walk from one end to the other, stopping in random stores, followed by some homely kid in a backwards cap with a southern accent that would make the cast of "HEE-HAW" ask "Isn't that a bit much?" They laugh, they hit each other, and they hand out high fives to kids walking with their parents. It would be kind of cute if they didn't smoke and curse like sailors. Jeremy's girls always seem to dress like him. They are all fanatics about that dancing game and they have their own style of dress. It is like a weird mix between hip hop, goth, rave, and punk rock. All of the "alternative" styles of my youth rolled into one.

An hour or two passes by and I get my desperately needed nap. I still had the runs, but the headache was gone. Now I'm wide awake and ready to read. Jeremy pops in sporadically to sit down and grab some free candy, but otherwise I'm alone and that is the way that I like it. Then REEE-REEE-REEE!!! Jeremy slipped and let this one get by, so he jumps up as if to help them. "No, I've got this one." I don't mind doing my job after a nap. It takes a while for the beeps, and bells, and blasts to completely kill my spirit. "I wants dat radio." There stands a four year old child pointing at my prize shelf without a parent in sight. Without a word I turn off that hideous bell and walk back into my little room. Before I close the door I notice something rank. Maurice wasn't just being a jerk, this place really stinks.

I weighed my options. I could either look for the smell or I could go back into my little room and hide out until Todd gets here. Which option do you think that I chose? Todd came bopping in excited about working in his favorite place around three. The rule is that there is one hour of overlap between my shift and the employees intended for instruction, but I usually just throw them the keys and run. "Todd listen, here is the deal. If you can find that smell I'll be your best friend forvever." Todd has a very comical face. He often overreacts in his facial expressions like some kind of silent movie actor. "That smell is just nasty, man. Let

me get a game in and then I'll check it out." Todd doesn't do anything until he has played at least twenty minutes of his fighting game. Now I'm intrigued. I want to know what is causing that hideous smell. I have located the general location as being behind the basketball shooting game. This is one of the games where you actually shoot the ball into a hoop at the back of the game. There is a large open space behind the machine.

Jeremy and I were discussing possible causes for the repulsive odor coming from behind the game. Jeremy said, "I think it's a dead rat." There was a possibility that a rat had died there, but the mall is usually pretty good about extermination. They would have trapped the rats or sprayed them or something. I knew better. "It is probably just an old soda can that someone threw back there." Jeremy didn't buy that for a second. "Soda don't smell like that." After that we lost interest and I walked back into my room and put my nose in a book.

Thirty minutes passed and I heard a knock at the door. Todd was ready to begin his shift and he needed my keys, so I decided to pretend to be a good manager and delegate the job of finding the smell. "Todd, here is a broom and a trash can. Let's push the game out a bit and you pick up whatever it is that is causing that stench." Todd and I unplugged the game and pushed it forward a couple of feet. "Alrighty Todd, get back there and do your thing." Todd ran into the back room for a moment to grab a flashlight. While walking toward the game he held up the flash light and gave me one of his silent movie actor looks as if to tell me that he was always one step ahead. Jeremy strutted over to see what all of the commotion was about. He and I stood there together and awaited Todd's discovery.

I have to admit that I was hoping for a dead animal, something really disgusting that would freak Todd out and cause him to distort his face to express his disgust. Boy, did I get more than I had bargained for. Jeremy and I watched the flashlight disappear behind the game. The anticipation was almost too much to bear until we hear, "EEEWWWWW!!!" Todd came charging from behind the game yelling and frantically waving his arms. "NNNAAAWWW MAN!!! HELL NO! THAT AIN'T RIGHT!!!" Jeremy stepped towards Todd as if to calm him down. "What is it?" For a brief second I thought that it must have been a human head. What else could possibly elicit such a reaction? I was seconds away from dialing 911. "What is it, Todd?" Todd continued jumping around and waving his arms. His face was contorting in dramatic ways that we had never witnessed before. "That is disgusting. I think I'm bout to throw up man, for real." Todd is a drama queen. That is an element of his personality that goes hand in hand with his mugging and his preachy conversational style. After a few seconds my cynical nature kicked in and I lost all hope that it was anything truly revolting. I calmly spoke in order to let Todd know that I wasn't buying his act. "Todd what is it?"

Todd continued his melodramatic overreaction until I grabbed him by the shoulders. "Todd, what is it?" He looked me in the eye and behind those big goofy eyes I could see that he was truly mortified. "I ain't touching that, man. No way." I had to calm him down, "Todd you have to tell me what that was." Todd went silent all of the sudden and lowered his head, as if for a moment of silent meditation before he spoke. "Man, Timothy, that's doonky back there." His eyes opened wide when he said the word "doonky," for emphasis of course. I was stunned. Not only by the thought of solid human waste on the floor of my arcade, but also because he used the word "doonky," which is hilarious in and of itself. Jeremy snatched the flashlight out of Todd's trembling hand and ran to the back of the game to take a look. Ten seconds later I heard him scream. "Dang, that is SHHH..." I cut him off just in time to preserve the innocence of my youthful clientele. "Dude, you have to be kidding me." I grabbed the flashlight out of Jeremy's hand as he ran out holding his nose. I walked slowly and cautiously to the back of the game, pointing the flashlight toward the carpet. Then, there it wasin the beam of my flashlight, like a big brown potato in the middle of a spotlight: a human turd.

I could feel the vomit rising to the edge of my throat and I tasted just a bit before I swallowed. I knew that the combination of feces and vomit would be too much to clean. Then I shouted, "That is @#$%ing disgusting!!!" Well, there goes my clientele's innocence. I could not believe what I was seeing. Many questions came to mind immediately. How could this be? Who would have done such a thing? Is that a peanut? Why am I staring at it? It was all too much.

True leadership is defined by how one acts in a crisis situation. "Todd, clean that @#$% up. I'm going home to take a shower." Jeremy started laughing and Todd stood there with his jaw on the floor. "Man, Timothy, I ain't about to touch that thing." I stood there silently pondering for just a second. I couldn't ask Todd to do this alone. Sure, my job title did include the authority to delegate work to my employees, but this just wasn't right. I had worked for far too many tyrannical, power mad bosses in cheesey positions of authority to make Todd do a job that I wasn't willing to do myself. I didn't want to be "The Man." For one brief moment I saw a little bit of myself in Todd and I decided we should handle this as a team. So, all three of us walked into the back room and shut the door.

There was another moment of silence as we all considered our options. After all, there was a lot to

think about. I could tell that Todd was relieved that he wasn't going to be left to deal with this dilemma alone. For the first time in the year that I had worked there, I felt like a good manager. Jeremy was the first to break the silence. "That is @#$%ed up!" I began pacing and asked, "Who could have done this? What kind of freakish pig would drop trou and plop one out on the floor of an arcade?" The three of us fell back into silence until Jeremy spoke up again. "I bet it was them kids that you got onto last Saturday." He might have been right. Last Saturday there was a group of young kids playing games without any parents around. They kept ringing the bell and asking me to come help them with jammed tokens. Then they would walk up to the prize counter with an ungodly amount of tickets to get prizes. They played for several hours until I began to wonder where they were getting all of this money. Usually, three eleven year old boys, alone in the mall do no carry sixty bucks apiece. So, I started watching them through the peephole to the door of my little room. I noticed they were walking behind the basketball game, I popped out and caught them stealing tokens from the coin pan. I told them to leave and made them give back all of their tokens. That was it. I was convinced that I had triumphed so I went back into my room and read an article about global warming. While pondering the turd behind my game, I could almost hear them laughing at me and it really stung.

Then there was this dad that was playing the basketball game and his tokens kept getting stuck. Over and over the bell kept ringing and each time I stumbled out to give him a free game. It must have happened twelve times before I became upset. REEE-REEE-REEE!!! "What?" This guy couldn't believe my nerve. "What you mean 'What'? The game keeps taking my tokens. That is what." He was nearly screaming at me. I stopped and turned to face him. There he was, this father of three children, who couldn't have been more than a few years older than me, ignoring his little seed and harassing me on a Saturday. There was a lot of rage in his eyes and you could tell that the world had been dumping on this guy for a long time. I stood there staring at him. Of course, I was hungover and only three seconds from letting this freak have it until his toddler son walked over and hugged his leg. The guy was a jerk and I would have loved to have put him in his place. Still, I'm no monster. I turned away and unlocked the machine. The man had become quiet as I was staring at him. I could tell that he thought that I was about to deck him. He was a little guy and must have been slightly intimidated. I wasn't going to hit him. I was only going to tell him what I really thought. He had shut up, but as I walked a way I put my hand behind my back and flipped him off. He didn't bother me for the rest of the day, but he was definitely a suspect in the case of the rotten potato.

There was no telling who it could have been. I left the floor unattended all of the time and I was pretty rude to nearly everyone. I wasn't aggressive or snotty but my apathy shined through in almost every encounter. I hated my job and everyone who became a part of it. Why *wouldn't* someone squeeze one out on my floor should have been the real question. I pictured that hundred pound dad squatting behind the machine with those big eyes bulging, mutterin, "I'll show that honkey not to mess with me," as he unloaded behind my game. Besides, it must have been a full grown man that dropped it because that thing was massive.

Maurice was a pretty unstable person. Maybe he was the culprit. He could have done it just to teach me a lesson. Then I went into leader mode, "Todd, here is what we are going to do." I grabbed the small plastic trashcan and my Rolling Stone magazine with Jessica Simpson on the cover. "Take this magazine and place it next to the turd. Then sweep it onto the magazine and throw them both into the trashcan. Hand the trashcan over to Jeremy, and Jeremy, you go toss them both into the dumpster outside." Jessica Simpson didn't deserve a cover anyway.

Before we got started, I walked back there one more time to see what we were up against. It was long and brown with white spots of mold. If I was Batman I would have taken it to the Batcave and scraped it for DNA, "Robin, this is the feces of none other than the Joker." I wonder how many people have to clean up human waste in their proffesion? Sure, sanitation workers, janitors, and porto-potty owners, but what about congressmen and leaders of industry? Do they ever handle poop?

The absurdity of the situation overcame me as I heard Todd preparing to sweep the turd. I started cracking up when I heard him scream, "It's rolling,man! I got it rolling!" When Jeremy heard me laughing, he began laughing as well. Then he decided to make Todd feel worse, "Todd, how you like your job now?" Todd was focused, so he didn't respond at first. Then he threatened to toss the turd in Jeremy's face. Jeremy and I kept laughing as we listened to Todd squeal in a high pitched manner. After about a minute his hand reached out with the trashcan and broom. It was time for Jeremy to take over. Todd yelled at him, "Grab this @#$% boy!" Jeremy must have been offended by Todd's commanding tone and he slapped the trashcan out of Todd's hand, spilling its contents back onto the floor. Although I was amused by Jeremy had done, I was the authority figure and I had to step in. I said, "Jeremy, you have to sweep it back into the trashcan."

Jeremy didn't actually work for the arcade. I gave him free candy and let him play free games but he wasn't getting paid or anything. I had no right to tell him to dispose of a turd and he knew it. Jeremy decided to politely decline my request, "I ain't cleaning that @#$% up." I was still laughing hysterically so I couldn't

speak up to stop him from walking away. Jeremy took off strutting away from the arcade to the goth store to steal a wrist band. That only left myself and Todd and there was no way that I was going near that thing again. I told Todd what to do, "Todd you have to try it again. This time, take the magazine and grab it with your hand, then run to the dumpster and toss it in." Todd had done what I had asked him the first time, but his faith in the chain of command was dwindling. He stopped and stared at me. The expression on his goofy face told me exactly what I had to do.

Todd had made the attempt to dispose of the thing and had been thwarted. He had been a good soldier once but this time I was asking far too much. We stood there looking at each other for a moment. I wanted to ask him to pick it up again but his eyes were pleading with me. He had only wanted to play video games for six bucks an hour. He never signed up for this. If I would have asked him again he would have done it. Todd would have grabbed the thing with his teeth if I would have threatened to fire him. I looked into his big brown eyes and I just couldn't do it. It was time for me to prove that I was a far better boss than Maurice. It was time for me to do the right thing.

I went back into my little room and I grabbed another broom. I took some plastic wrap that we used to wrap the glass monitors in transit and I wrapped the end of the broom. Then I grabbed a Time magazine that proclaimed George W. Bush the man of the year and I laid it face up beside the turd. It was about to get nasty.

I have often heard that it is a man's actions that define his character in the end. Some men find glory on the battlefield. Some men march for freedom. Some men triumph over injustice and change the world. I swept a turd onto a magazine and tossed it into a plastic trashcan. I sprinted outside , then I tossed the brooms and trashcan into the dumpster, ran back to the arcade and washed my hands repeatedly. After washing my hands for fifteen minutes I picked up the phone and called Maurice. "Consider this my two weeks notice." I said, "This job is @#$%!"

"Incredible Hulk," Dean Miller, Ink and Color Pencil

A Hero's Welcome

by Sean Kymalainen

A sliver of light could be seen between the two large oak doors that held back my greatest fear. I sat in a stiff, metal chair staring at their heavy presence, pondering the depths of irony. I am just an average, non-descript man meandering through life. Few know or care about Jonathan Rice, a city cab driver who works the shifts of the night owls. Today, however, I am something more. I am a witness in a fantastic murder trial. Unfortunately, what I have to say is not what everyone would like to hear. It is this fact that makes me want to crawl in the hole of some dark, dank cave where the light cannot reach. Ironically, though, darkness is nowhere to be seen. My day is full of light, shining on me as if someone needed to watch me closely. The thought brought me back to the sun I saw this morning.

My morning started with a sunrise. I would like to say that I woke up to a beautiful sight, inspired by romantic allusions, but I cannot. In fact, the reason that I saw the sunrise was because I never fell asleep. Perhaps that is why I felt the sun watched me with its blood red eye accusing me with its horrible sight. An image from the past screamed its way into my present. An apple, slowly expanding burst in my mind. In my dream this vision became so real that I would find myself crying out in the dark night of the moonless alley-way behind my apartment. For that reason I decided to stay awake for as long as I can. Could anyone blame me?

It had been two days since I last found comfort in the depths of any slumber. I knew, in my mind, that all my horrors were related to my dilemma of truth or lies. I had walked to the courthouse from my apartment. It was only a short walk and I liked crossing the park along the way. Somehow it had made me feel calmer. Of course I was not alone. A member of the world famous "Hall" had escorted me there for my own protection. This superhero was idolized by many in the city. He was, in fact, Black Night, the founder of the Hall almost thirty years ago. He was incredibly tall, at over seven and a half feet, and although he no longer fought as a superhero, he still inspired awe in the many people who witnessed his immense capacity for strength.

We had walked over to the courthouse in a leisurely manner in which little was said between us. Upon reaching the courthouse, Black Night had stopped me with his arm and turned me around with the ease of a child playing with a plastic doll. When I had looked up into his face I knew my future was at a crossroads. His voice is still ringing in my ears, even though his words were spoken over two hours ago. He said to me that he had fought for the city and the "Hall" for his entire life. He had given everything to it. Keep that in mind, he had said, when on the witness stand. He and the rest of the "Hall" will not let what they have built be destroyed. Be a part of the team and be a hero. He had then left me to walk the last flight of steps to my waiting room.

It had seemed so simple at first. Tell a lie so that the world would be free of an evil entity and thereby keep the honor and integrity of the "Hall" intact. No stain must be allowed to tarnish the image of purity and justice or the people will lose hope. Resolutely I had walked up those stairs until I was greeted by the twin statues of the Guardian Twins who framed the entrance to the courthouse. These two legendary heroes lost their lives to Dr. Pestilence many years before when he had first come to prominence. Black Night had written the epitaphs on the bottom of each statue himself. I had paused long enough to read each one. On the statue to the left was written "Let truth and honor be the virtues we hold" while the statue on the right had the words "Let justice be fair and true to all, whoever they may be." Underneath each epitaph was a signed pledge by every member of the "Hall." I had stared a long time before I finally entered the courthouse and was led to the waiting room, which is where I find myself now.

My lone window is small as if there was a fear that I would fly away from all this attention. I would if I could. The sky beckons with a heavenly shade of blue, the light puffs of white thirsting with nectar. The bright sun, though, mocks me with its fire on my brow. It's the light that hurts me. It blazes in fury in its effort to deny the grace of my peace. Unable to maintain a gaze with such a forceful eye, I turn my attention to the floor as I consider the depths of my dilemma.

Should the truth be told? The consequences of such an act seem too horrible to contemplate. Horror, revulsion, despair and disgust would no doubt be results. Hatred, the pure hatred of an entire society, though, would be laid on *my* shoulders. I am not sure if I can deal with that. Why does truth have to have such a terrible price tag? That part wasn't written on either epitaph I noticed. There are, of course, none of these terrible consequences if I lie. Only two other people will know the truth and they will never say anything. I will not have to fear any retribution. I will be seen as a hero by all. Jonathan Rice will be seen by many as a great man doing his civic duty with none the wiser... I would know though.

Growing up I remember worshiping every member of the "Hall" as an idol. The one superhero that

stood out the most for me, though, was Molecularman. I was sick myself during that terrible epidemic of wasting disease which Dr. Pestilence inflicted upon us. It was Molecularman who found a way to save us and I was indebted to him. That was nearly fifteen years ago. I watched his career religiously from that point on, saving every newspaper clipping of his exploits. It was my desire to see him in action once in my life. Never did I think it would be like this. I never knew how lonely it can be with the truth.

It is lonely in this room. The walls are barren of any stimulation which leaves one with nothing but thoughts. I see by my watch that I have been in here for over two hours. Each minute, though, feels like an eternity. A fly, God only knows why, keeps going through the motions of flying through the small window. Will it never learn that, for all its transparency, the window will not budge? For I know that the world out there is not the same as the one in here. But, I can't help think, that it should be.

The floors have been waxed recently I think. Why do they insist on squeaky floors? Is it so that we can hear the footsteps of doom which increasingly thunder with each maddening clop? I can hear a light murmuring on the other side of the doors. I feel myself straining to hear but I cannot catch any words. Are they talking of me, I wonder? The murmuring continues like a low hum until it suddenly pauses. In a loud booming voice, I clearly hear the prosecutor say "Cindy Davis!"

That was her name, the girl that was murdered that is. I have only seen her that one night but that was enough to etch her in my mind forever. She wore a white sundress when I saw her. What stood out, though, was the print of an apple on her chest that was large and deeply hued. It was dark in the alley, lit by a few overhead street lights that made the scene appear quite hazy. Her hair was a raven black, straight, with a clean, medium length cut that framed a pale, very pretty face. Her lips contrasted with the paleness of her skin by matching the rich hue of the apple on her dress. From my vantage point, about thirty feet away, she appeared to be asleep. I knew as I had inched closer, though, that it was just the sleep of eternity.

I did not want to believe my eyes, but the evidence could not be erased from sight. The girl was dead, murdered before me in gruesome fashion. The apple on her breast was larger now, so large in fact that I realized her heart had been torn out. I trembled from the top of my head to the very tip of my toes. The tumult that I had witnessed only a few minutes before gave had given way to an eerie silence that was now only broken by the chirping of a single cricket. I heard sirens nearing and when I looked down the long blocks of alleys in the distance I saw the familiar flashes of blue and red. No doubt Molecularman had raised the alarm. As soon as I had risen my arm in an effort to attract their notice a steel grip tore through my shoulder.

I looked up into the kind, simple eyes of the bailiff, a large white man with a puffy red face. His hand, resting on my shoulder, softly shook me from my hellish thoughts. "It's time, Jonathan," he said.

His words filled my body with a sudden rush of adrenaline. My hands began to shake so badly that I balled them into fists and released them several times in a quick attempt at regaining my composure. I made to rise from my seat but my legs would not obey. Breathing deeply, I stared at the floor and then at the bailiff. "I'm scared," I told him.

The bailiff pursed his lips and looked at the twin doors. "Don't be, Jonathan. The Hall will protect you. He will never be able to hurt anyone again after this."

"What if The Hall will not protect me?" I asked. "What will I do then?"

"Nonsense," said the bailiff. "The Hall has always protected us. They will protect you as well. You have nothing to fear, so let's go."

The bailiff opened the doors and led me into the courtroom. I had a sensation of falling as bright flashes blinded me. Through the stars I could still make out the imposing presences of The Hall, encircling the courtroom with their solidly set expressions. They were a closely knit group that fought side by side on many occasions. Half the members of the Hall owed their lives in some fashion to Molecularman. Each of them also had a secret identity that they cherished as well. The weight of their collective stares dragged me further into an abyss. I never thought, in all my years of idol worship, that one day these superheroes would inspire fear in my bones. I made my way to the witness stand next to the judge, a seventy year old woman with glasses, with a stern stiffness about her that immediately pressed the conscience of my mind. "Swear the witness in," she instructed and with that I was solemnly doomed.

With a tremendous effort of will I looked at the defendant's table. There, in all his evil, sat the ominous presence of Dr. Pestilence. Forty nine years of age and yet he had the youthful appearance of an Adonis. He appeared to be about six feet tall and weigh a fit one hundred and eighty pounds. His blond, wavy hair did not show even a trace of white. His eyes, however, were blazing with burning hues that seemed to morph as he scanned the room. The sheer evil of his existence exuded from his seat and wafted throughout the room. My teeth began to slowly grind together as I wringed my hands. The chains that held him in place seemed too inadequate for the task. It was, after all, this man who discovered the secret to the cause and cure of all disease. What this man could have become, I can only hazard to guess. What he did become was a scourge

on humanity.

I felt light headed and ill. The room was spinning and my mind would not focus. Out of this haze I heard a voice. It was the voice of Dr. Pestilence. "Are we sick, Mr. Rice? If you need any assistance you may rest assured that I will be at your service."

Before I had any chance to reply the judge said "The defendant will refrain from speaking. Is that understood, Doctor?"

Dr. Pestilence, with a devious smirk, nodded his head and replied "of course, your honor. I would never think of offending a proceeding in search of the truth." Dr. Pestilence then leisurely crossed his legs and placed his two hands together like a tent. Leaning back in his chair he softly chuckled as he stared in my direction.

Such power he possessed. I knew, as everyone else knew, that his discovery enabled him to be immunized against the effects of all disease including the effects of aging. His strength grew to the limits of human potential. His intelligence magnified to almost god-like proportions. It is such a shame that he did not share this discovery with the world. When I look at the members of the Hall today in the courtroom, I can see their disdain for him. They too thought he wasted his discovery when he could have saved billions of people. Instead he chose to subjugate those billions with an eye on total world domination. It was only through the efforts of Molecularman that disaster was averted.

Dr. Pestilence's grin slowly retreated as his disturbing eyes narrowed. I instinctively shrank from his glare. In the back of the room I could just make out the form of Molecularman. His red and blue cape fluttered behind his large frame even though we were indoors. How is that possible? The prosecutor, a man in his late thirties, short and stocky, strolled to the stand in a self-confident manner. After some preliminary questioning, the prosecutor, a man who never introduced himself to me said "Mr. Rice what were you doing the night of June the twelfth?"

I breathed deeply a few times as I sorted out my thoughts. Thankfully the question was not something I needed to worry about so I said "I was working the night shift, driving my cab looking for a fare."

"And did you find a fare?" he asked.

"Not exactly," I answered.

The prosecutor frowned and said "what do you mean you didn't exactly find a fare? It was my understanding that you did."

"Well," I began, "my fare was a call from the station. Max said I should pick up this girl on the corner of Edison and Main."

"Who is Max?" he asked.

"Max is our dispatcher," I replied.

The prosecutor turned slowly towards the jury and asked "Did Max say anything unusual about this fare?"

I paused for a moment and replied "yes he did. He said that she sounded frightened and I should be very cautious when picking her up."

"And were you cautious, Mr. Rice?"

"Yes… I was. I parked my cab around the block so I could check the area out in case it was a setup." I tried not to look anywhere particular but I couldn't help notice that Molecularman was staring at me from the back of the room. His emblem, a large, white J on his chest overpowered my sight. Unlike most superheroes, Molecularman did not wear a symbol of his name. His symbol was for *justice*. It was one of the reasons why I had been so proud of his career. I came to believe in that principle because my hero had.

The prosecutor clasped his hands behind his back and paced before the jury. "What did you find in your scouting?" he continued.

I thought back to that horrible night. I clearly remember the stink of the garbage cans in the alley. Steam rose from a vent by the road. Even through the haze I could make out the forms of two men fighting. I leveled my eyes in a stare at nothingness. "I saw a tremendous fight," I said.

"Who did you see fighting, Mr. Rice?"

I looked at the defense table and then towards the back of the room. My hands began to shake again. With a cracked voice, I replied "Dr. Pestilence and Molecularman."

"Did either of them notice you?" he asked.

Time seemed to slow. I struggled with my tongue. Dr. Pestilence's grin seemed to widen as far as a Cheshire cat. In the back of the room I could clearly hear Molecularman's light cough. Finally, I softly said "No, they didn't."

The prosecutor slowly made his way towards the defense table. He turned his back to me and looked at Dr. Pestilence. "There was a girl there also, wasn't there Mr. Rice?"

I swallowed a gulp of air and closed my eyes. I could still see her underneath my eyelids, however. It was so incredibly vivid. I shifted a little in my chair, but it still felt hot. "Yes," I finally replied, "there was."

The prosecutor, after a lengthy pause, went on. "This girl, Cindy Davis was her name, was murdered that night. Did you happen to see the circumstances that led up to that terrible tragedy?"

"Yes I did," I replied.

"Could you please tell us what you overheard just before Cindy was brutally murdered?"

"I overheard Dr. Pestilence demand that she tell him what the secret identity of Molecularman was."

"And how did Miss Davis respond?" asked the prosecutor.

I had to hesitate. This is where it might really blow up in my face. I thought for the best way to answer the question, but all avenues were paths to lies. Perhaps against my better judgment I said "I never heard her speak. I only saw and heard Dr. Pestilence with his demands from her. I didn't see her until afterward." The look on Dr. Pestilence's face when I said that could only be described as awestruck, with his mouth opened in a silent "O."

Dr. Pestilence, sitting motionlessly, only grabbed my attention for a moment because the prosecutor turned abruptly around and raised a clenched fist. His face, contorted in an odd smile, struck me as more than a little frightening. The courtroom seems to be littered with frightening people today. No one, not even the kind looking bailiff, seemed to offer me a smile. It almost seems as if everyone is on the same team and I am just not willing to play. Very slowly the prosecutor paced until he stopped directly in front of me. He eyed me up and down while letting out a small "tsk..tsk." He breathed deeply and asked "Did you or did you not see the defendant murder Cindy Davis in the alleyway that night?"

I tried staring into nothingness again. But the apple was now intruding on my waking thoughts as well. Justice for all, no matter who they may be I thought. I started to reply and then choked on my own lie. I asked for a glass of water, which the bailiff gave me, as he laid his iron grip on my shoulder. I looked up into the eyes of a policeman. This was not the bailiff. This was the policeman of that dreadful night. He put his finger to his lips and motioned me to the side of the alley. He paused for a second and said "what you have seen and heard here cannot be retold. You must know that our city depends on it. If the truth should be known then we all that we have fought for will be lost. Do you understand?"

My heart beat rapidly and my legs were paralyzed. All I could do was nod my head. I will save my hero and Dr. Pestilence will be put away forever. The policeman leaned close to my face, so close that his foul onion breath made me recoil. His grimy complexion was silhouetted by an overhanging light. He whispered in a soft tone "now this is what you will say…"

I felt my arm shake and slowly I began to realize that I was back in the courtroom. Each trip back into the past brought me closer to that horror. What will make it go away? The prosecutor, red as a beet, was imploring the judge to force me to answer. I felt a calmness that I had never felt before. It was as if my inner soul suddenly became lighter. A light voice, coming from somewhere in my mind, comforted me. I raised my head and looked the prosecutor in the eye. I said "no, I didn't see Dr. Pestilence kill Cindy Davis."

The prosecutor' face froze for just a second, but he quickly recovered and said "did you or did you not, Mr. Rice give a deposition that the defendant did in fact murder Cindy Davis?"

"Yes I did."

"Then why," he began in an exasperated voice, "did you just say that you did not see him do it?" The prosecutor kept shaking his head no slightly in what appeared to be disbelief. Amazingly, in the back of the room, I could see Molecularman seated with his strong jaw resting on his fist. Even from that distance I could see that he was gnashing his teeth.

I could feel the tension in the air. Dr. Pestilence's grin actually seemed to widen in enjoyment at my predicament. If his grin got any wider it would be just a circle on his face. He does not even seem to care about his own situation. I can't help but wonder if he feels anything at all. Could that have been a byproduct of his discovery? I shuddered at the thought. I have come too far now to go back. The apple began to drip red as it faded from my mind. Slowly I said, in a voice that I knew must have sounded strained, "because… I was told to lie about what I saw and heard."

The stars flashed so rapidly that it became hard to see in front of me. The murmuring and hushed whispers continued for several minutes as the judge tried to restore order. In the confusion I lost track of where everyone was located. I grew fearful of the unknown. At the same time, however, a premonition of the known filled me with dread. Somehow, I know what the consequences will be. But I must stay true to the principle. It is, after all, the principle itself and not the man behind it that must be saved. Otherwise, what is the point in fighting for it?

The prosecutor began to pace so rapidly that the judge ordered him to sit still. At that precise moment Dr. Pestilence started to laugh and he continued to laugh so hard and so long that the judge finally ordered

him to be gagged. Finally, the prosecutor approached me and asked "who told you to lie about the case? Was it me? Anybody in the D.A.'s office? Who?"

"No one connected to the case. It was a police officer who I haven't seen again. He told me to lie at the murder scene."

"Why," he continued "did he want you to lie?"

This was the moment of truth. I knew that the world as I knew it would change forever. My life had been pretty decent to this point. No troubles, I paid my bills. I also had seen, in action, the superhero Molecularman. He was the only man capable of defeating Dr. Pestilence. His power to change his molecular structure made him invulnerable to the bacterial devices created by Dr. Pestilence. Their battle in the alley-way was furious and awesome to behold. They both possessed such extraordinary strength that it was amazing anyone could survive the terrific blows they each delivered to one another.

I will never forget the sight of Molecularman flinging Dr. Pestilence over fifty feet in the air to crash against a solid brick wall that crumbled from the impact. Nor will I ever forget how he stopped Dr. Pestilence's death darts by forming his body into a gaseous cloud. My skin prickled when I saw that happen. It prickles now because I know what he is capable of. Molecularman was a superhero and he was my boyhood idol. It was so heartbreaking to see that he was a false idol.

I scanned the courtroom, but could no longer find any trace of Molecularman. For some reason, that made my skin crawl. Somehow...I would rather *know* where he is. I answered the prosecutor in a hoarse whisper with "he wanted me to protect Molecularman."

"What does Molecularman, a superhero I might add, need in the way of protection from you?"

"Well, the truth of the matter is it was...Molecularman who murdered Cindy Davis and not Dr. Pestilence."

Several loud "No's" rang out in unison from all corners of the courtroom. The furor would not abate and finally the judge ordered that the courtroom to be cleared of spectators. When order was restored it was discovered that not only was Molecularman gone, but the whole Hall as well. Not a trace of a single superhero remained in the building.

The prosecutor, when questioning resumed, charged at me with an unrestrained fury. "You do realize what you have done," he shouted. "You have impugned the reputation of this city's greatest citizen. What would make you think that we could actually believe Molecularman murdered Cindy Davis? That man has saved our fair city again and again from the machinations of super villains such as Dr. Pestilence. What, pray tell, would be his motive?"

"Untitled," Elizabeth Bedell, Black Paper

I knew I was lost. They would never believe my story and I would 'disappear' somehow. But at least I was honest to poor Cindy Davis. I could at least be true to her. Justice may not come in the form of punishment, but at least she will have the justice of truth. "Mr. Prosecutor," I sternly said, "on the night of June the twelfth Molecularman murdered Cindy Davis because she knew his secret identity. I don't know how she knew, but she knew. Dr. Pestilence found out somehow and was prepared to get it out of her in some way or other. What I saw, though, was not a murder by Dr. Pestilence. Instead, I saw Molecularman thrust his arm, in the shape of a metal tube, backwards against the wall. I did not see what he had hit at first, but I heard the slight gasp of a female voice. I saw a little later that it was Cindy."

The prosecutor wringed his hands and then ran them through his hair. "It could have been an accident, couldn't it have?" he implored.

I slowly shook my head. "No," I said. "I clearly heard him tell Dr. Pestilence that he would be blamed for this crime and then he laughed. He laughed at how he had committed the murder and Dr. Pestilence would have to pay for it. He also said that she deserved it for trying to leak his identity."

The prosecutor and defense attorney, who strangely never said a word during all of this, accompanied the judge in her chambers to talk for several minutes. When they finally returned the judge looked at me and said "you are dismissed Mr. Rice."

I looked from the prosecutor back to the judge. I felt vulnerable. I said "your honor, may I have some protection? I fear for my safety. Molecularman may come after me."

The judge looked at me with solemn eyes and shook her head. "The entire Hall has left," she said. "Besides…I doubt any of them would offer to protect you…and none of us can do anything against a superhero. I'm afraid you are on your own Mr. Rice." She pointed to the doors and had the bailiff escort me out. As I left the courtroom I caught the smirk of Dr. Pestilence who was being led back to his cell. How will they hold him without a superhero? I knew the answer, of course. They can't. The city needs superheroes.

The lobby was full of people who stared with disgustful faces. I put on my coat and hat and lowered the brow as far as possible. I tried to leave the building as quickly as possible. Once outside I headed for home. The park is about halfway between the courthouse and my apartment and that thought led me towards its inviting garden. I leisurely walked down a commonly treaded path. The gravel kicked up from my heels with an accompanying crunch sound. A little on the way I spied an old bench that seemed to beckon for attention. I stopped and sat on this bench. It was cold, with the black paint flecking off it but somehow it gave me warmth.

The sun was setting in the west, its light slowly extinguishing. The blood red eye had given way to a soft purple one which seemed to smile as it fell on the horizon. I watched the last rays slip in the distance. My head grew light and my heart, in a silent salute, tugged. Looking down at my breast I saw the familiar apple of that fateful night. The birds seemed to be silent at the moment, perhaps as a tribute to the dying day. The warmth of the sun receded as I felt the onset of cold. I could not focus my eyes but it seemed I saw Cindy Davis waving to me in the distance. She pointed at the apple on my chest. I stared at it for a moment as it ripened to fruition. It was going to be a very large apple.

"Untitled," Photograph, Luciana Carniero

Tangled Up in the Blues

by Karen White

She was not late for work. She was adamant about that one fact up until the end. She woke up regularly, showered frugally, and then prepared for her day, as usual. She got into her car, drove to work at the prescribed speed limit of 55, got out of the car, walked to the door of the store, reached for her keys . . .

Her keys to the store were at home. She could see them, hanging mockingly on the peg beside the door, teasing her with their location that was diametrically opposed to her hands at that moment. Because she organized her day so stringently, she had fifteen minutes. She decided to try the bypass to get home and back again.

On the way home, she cursed herself. She hadn't indulged in any alteration to her morning ritual. She had not opted for a morning quickie—those days were gone, since he'd left. She hadn't spent the previous night drinking; she went to bed at an appropriate hour, not too early to be considered depressing, but not so late as to be insomnia. She woke up with no ill feelings or rush, so there was no logical reason for her forgetfulness.

As she coursed through her self-defeating cycle, she missed the exit for her part of town. She noticed almost immediately, but just that second too late to do anything about it. She hurriedly tried to adopt her contingency plan for such situations: take the next exit and turn around. She did take the next exit, but she did not turn around. As soon as she reached the end of the ramp, the world went blue.

The blue was not dark; she determined that she was not blind. No, the blue was bright, yet washed out. The road before her glowed with the pale, almost white blue. The trees were lined in a slightly darker version, but the core of the trees, the trunks and branches, were whitish blue. The street signs were illegible from the coloration, so she could not quite get her bearings.

She refused to panic; panic is the killer of souls and all things good, or at least her so her mother had mentioned everyday of her life. She'd organized her life in such a way that panic was never an option. However, her heart raced and her breathing picked up and her eyelids fluttered and the blue just stayed.

Not once did it occur to her that stopping the car was an option because stopping was never an option for this one. Her plan was to simply take the next exit and turn around. So far, the plan went awry because she had not turned around, so she immediately turned around, in the middle of the road, regardless of traffic. Thankfully, the road was deserted. Not so thankfully, the road had disappeared altogether.

No problem, she thought, of course, I can handle this; I can form a plan at the drop of a hat, this is my skill. She thought these things as the sky melded with the earth on the horizon, right before the horizon vanished. She thought these things as she heard the voices sing in her head that she deserved to wink out of natural existence; no one would really miss her if she went in one fell swoop. The voices were blue–washed out, faded jeans and too bright clear sky of the desert. They were pale mock-ups of the real thing; the voices of her mother's calm criticisms and her now gone husband's jubilant lies mixed with the rasp of her dying grandmother and gruff of her thoroughly anal boss. She then knew that the keys would never be found in this state of being; further, the house had gone–she just knew it, deeply and sincerely, she knew that her life as she once knew it was gone forever.

She kept driving, listening to the clamor in her head that drowned out all other sounds; the wind sheer against the car was absolutely no match for the phrase her mother's keening voice rammed into her consciousness: I'm . . . just . . . so . . . disappointed. Her husband rumbled a retort: I love you, I do, I need you, i do, I have to do this, you don't need me fucking up your life, I know just what you need. Grandmother's voice was all cobbler and maple syrup, with a hint of nicotine: Kiddo, just give it up, keep driving, keep driving, keep going, don't ever stop, if you stop you die, look at me, I stopped, I'm stopping, I will stop forever. Her boss stuck with the immediate situation at hand: What time is it? What do you mean you forgot the keys? What kind of assistant are you? What am I paying you for anyway?

Panic. The blue streak of panic consoled her, caressing her lungs as she gasped for breath, tracing over her stomach lining as the ulcer broke through, draping her eyes with the stark reality of the summer day. She'd forgotten her keys, but more importantly, she'd forgotten her lessons, her rules, herself. She smiled at the face in her deteriorating rear view mirror; the face that peered back, leering, was the face of Panic, her lover, her friend, her solace, her indulgence for the morning. She pulled over, still staring into Panic's blue eyes, cold and icy. She reveled in her fear; she ignored the polite police voice asking if she was okay. She just kept seeing the blue and loving the end of her existence.

"Untitled," Mia Montgomery, Prismacolor Pencils

"Untitled," Mia Montgomery, Charcoal

Fever

by Carmela Orsini

I'm under the protection of three comforters and my fleece pajamas, yet I still shiver. The air conditioner and fans are all turned off and it's the middle of July – in Georgia. Yes, I am sick.

I stare down the unlit hallway leading from my bedroom to the kitchen where medication awaits me in my small, early twenties apartment. By the sound of the clock hanging next to my fridge, the kitchen is approximately three inches from my ear, but my eyes deceive me. The kitchen must surely be at least half a mile from my warmer bed.

I have been fighting this battle in my head for quite some time. I must be able to work in the morning; you can't call in sick on your first day. So, should I take the fever medication in hopes that once my symptoms subside I will be able to find rest, or should I take the sleep medication hoping that a good night's rest will cure me? My aching limbs tell me that reaching the kitchen won't happen regardless my decision. The logical answer is to stay in bed where I at least have my three comforters, but come nine o'clock, I must leave the bed regardless of how I feel. So back to my dilemma: relief or sleep?

Still unsure of my answer, I decide to start my trudge to the kitchen. I peel off my covers like healthy layers of skin, unwillingly and painfully. The alarm clock glows at me. 1:26 am. I've been fighting sleep for only an hour. My journey is long, slow, and agonizing. Each step comes with a new ache and the constant shivering doesn't help the pains rushing down my spine.

I finally fumble for the lights. 1:22. Could it be that it's been an entire day since I left the comfort of my queen sized bed? Could it be that I'm stuck in some sort of space-time continuum where time runs backwards? Could it be that my clocks aren't synchronized? I shall ponder the thought no longer.

I am forced, however, to finally answer the question that has been haunting my sleepless slumber, but, alas, I cannot. A compromise then. Half a dose of each. Shouldn't kill me. Instead of taking the normal two pills of each, I shall take one pill of both. That ought to do something. The idea suddenly seems so obvious and genius to me, but it could just be the fever talking. Opening the pills is ridiculously harder than normal, but that's probably because my hands/fingers won't stop shivering/shaking from the cold. I grab a bottle of water from the fridge to swallow the pills with, but the smell of food makes me gag. I quickly resort to my time-tested, mother-not-approved remedy for vomiting – I eat a freshly picked booger. I never could figure that one out, but it works every time. Maybe the mouth is tricked. It was thinking the nasty stuff was going to come out, but it grows confused when the nasty comes in instead. I digress.

The trip back to my room seems to go much quicker with this newfound contemplation regarding boogers and vomit, but my symptoms and inability to sleep still remain. 1:29 am. Three minutes. Three stinking minutes to travel the twenty feet to my kitchen, take a couple of pills, and return back. Seems right.

Or perhaps the aliens are coming after all.

Buddha on the Hill

by Karen White

I woke up to the sound of metal clicking against the spokes of my wheelchair. The combination of the high-pitched keen-and-click with the vibration in the still air more than startled me; the grating noise amplified the mean hangover I had started the night before. I cracked an eyelid to see who'd broken into my room. All I could see was a sharp smile and a knitting needle.

"Well, Stanley. Wakey, wakey. Where's the money?"

I surveyed the situation. Standing beside my chair and holding the needle, I had Joey Jakes, money collector for our local gambling baron, Kevin the Mick. He carried the knitting needle because it wasn't considered a weapon. He had a huge Star of David around his neck and was wearing a yarmulke. The light creeping in from the blinds glinted off the silver, intensifying my headache.

"What money? I haven't bet in weeks."

"How do you like that. He hasn't placed a bet in weeks." Joey looked up as if expecting an answer. I glanced over at my dresser, trying to shade my eyes from the glare from around his neck. As I tracked my gaze over my collected shit, my eyes snagged on a red resin Buddha I'd won at a carnival. I loved that thing.

Joey looked back at me. "Seriously, Stanley, where's the money?"

I looked back at Joey. "What's the point, man? I don't owe, and even if I did, I don't have the money. Just go away." I yawned, feeling the pins and needles in my back from sleeping in the chair.

Joey chuckled. "Stanley, do you remember how you got your nickname?"

I rolled my eyes. "Of course I do, Joey."

Joey cut me off. "No, I love telling this one. One time, you owed Kevin some money, but wouldn't pay up. Apparently, you think that cripples get a discount." Joey laughed at his ever-present wit. "Anyway, I had to come see you, and you wouldn't pay. Just like now. I hit you so hard you went walleyed for days."

I looked back at Buddha. He smiled. "Great story, Joey. I still don't owe shit."

Joey ignored me. "What I never understood is why you're called the Butcher."

I kept my face still. "Cause it's my last name. Until you came into my life, sunshine, I used to be just Stanley Butcher."

Joey looked up again. "Aw. That's sweet. Didya hear that? He called me sunshine. We're like an old married couple." Joey laughed again, then looked at me. He scowled. "If you don't cough up, I'm gonna find the money somewhere."

I wised up. I knew I hadn't bet in weeks; nothing much had been going on. We didn't bet on sports or cards or anything like that. Instead, we bet on whether or not the cops would bust up the local crack house or if the whores would raise their prices to match the rise in gas prices. Stuff like that. But, the Mick took that shit seriously. He had weird odds, too. And I always lost. And he never gave a cripple discount. No, I realized that Joey was just trying to shake me down.

I stopped looking at Buddha and looked over at Joey, nonplussed. "Joey, I'm not givin' you crap. I ain't got any money. I ain't gonna let you hit me. Just let me sleep off the drunk, please, for God's sakes, I just want to sleep, maybe eat, just leave me alone." I heard the blubbering rise in my throat, the fake shame. He always fell for that.

"All right, man. I'm comin' back later. I gotta feelin' that Kevin's bookkeeping will show your error. I swear you bet on Jesus Freak last week."

I woke up quick, headache disappearing. "What happened to Jesus?"

Joey walked over to the unmade bed on the other side of my chair. I felt an amazing urge to trip him, but if I had, he would've found out I could walk. Buddha sat with his belly, governing over us all.

"Well, the Jesus Freak got caught, finally. He'd been pulling the legs off those fish things on the backs of the cars by the school. All those teachers got the fish with legs. Anyway, the cops got him." Joey paused for a brief moment of silence for a fallen hero. "They took him in around 10 last night. He was jitterin' and spewin' some crap about being a fisher of men or some such nonsense."

While Joey talked, I scratched the scruff on my face and thought about ol' Jesus. He was a squirrelly guy. I figured he'd go down long before now. If he wasn't prying off those fish legs, he was taking a permanent marker to pagan bumper stickers or stealing the letters off church signs so they'd only say "Jesus hates cats" and nothing else. I liked Jesus, though. He was good for talk on the street, and he was the only one who knew my secret.

"Well. Sad for Jesus. Get out Joey." I wheeled back from the bed and hit the wall behind me, knocking a healthy amount of dust from the windowsill. I sneezed; Joey laughed.

"Bless you. All right, man. I'll go for now. But I'll be back later."

With that, he went back out of the door he'd pried open, leaving it open. I wheeled over to shut it, then stood up. Buddha stood smiling in the very center of the dresser. I noticed the stuff on my dresser was all arranged, and then I remembered the last time I saw Jesus. He'd come to visit and kept fiddling with the stuff on my dresser.

I swear; I could've taken a ruler to the spaces and they'd have all matched up. Around his feet were five coins, in a half-moon shape, all quarters. I felt rich. On top of his head, like a halo, was a plastic pull from a cigarette pack. Now that surprised me; I never picked up smoking, so he must have brought in the pull.

Running parallel to the happy guy he'd placed two matches, one with head down, the other with head up. Below the quarters he'd lined up a used sucker stick that had lint all over it.

I stared at the picture for a minute, trying to figure out the pattern and thinking of Jesus. I realized how bummed I really was that he'd been picked up. The last time I'd seen him, he was excited about something he'd read, something I'd inadvertently turned him on to. He was trying to see the connection between Jesus and Buddha, mostly because I'd given him the quick history of Buddhism one day while we were working college students for spare change.

"So it's all about suffering; is that all you see?"

When he had asked me that, I kind of jumped in my chair. "No, I guess the suffering means something, like it makes life whole or something. I don't really know, Jesus. All I know is that in this life we have to get it right, or else you repeat it. Or maybe that's reincarnation. I get confused." I scratched my face, thinking for a minute. "All religions are connected. The only differences seem to be after you die."

Jesus chuckled. That's when I noticed the new lines around his eyes and how bird-like his body was getting. I started to wonder if he was sick or something or maybe just getting old. We all get old quick on the hill, old and tired.

"Well, I don't know about getting it right, but I haven't done much in my life one way or another. I just try to spread the word, but I think I've forgotten what the word is."

It was after that day that I saw him on the street, almost jumping out of his skin with excitement. He was carrying a book, a big dusty looking thing he said he had gotten from the Mick. He didn't tell me what it was, just that reminded him of what the word was. Needless to say, I promptly forgot his vague excitement until Joey mentioned that the cops had picked him up. I decided that my goal for the day was to find out about Jesus to ask him about the message he'd left on my dresser.

I pulled out some sort of fresh clothes from the top drawer of my dresser. I hadn't changed in about a week, and my room didn't involve any sort of shower. The building I was in used to be some old hotel, but the city condemned it a long time ago. The guys who took it over fixed it up for low rent; they let me stay for free because they felt sorry for me, but not quite sorry enough to let me use the bathroom every so often. The wheelchair has its advantages sometimes, when I need somewhere to stay, but I hated the lie. Besides, if you gotta take a leak in an alley littered with the homeless, and you're in a wheelchair, you can't just stand up and piss. It's a bitch, but a guy's gotta do what he's gotta do, I guess.

I got dressed in the uniform for our side of town, jeans and a T-shirt with some beer logo on the front and a titsy girl on the back. I combed through my hair with my fingers. It felt like straw; I'd bleached it months before in an attempt to look a bit different if, say, Joey came asking after me. Sometimes the wheelchair has its disadvantages, too, because different hair doesn't erase it in people's minds.

I sat back in the chair and wheeled into the hall. People were walking back and forth, but nobody noticed me or said anything. This place always seems to have a thousand people all the time, moving like ants at a picnic. They never really slow down and just sit. They just scurry along, usually in a straight line, unless I'm in the hall, then they swerve just enough to go around.

At the end of the hall, I stopped to get on the old elevator. When I got on, I noticed that there was stuff in the corner. I hit L, let the elevator go about a floor, and then pushed the emergency stop. I got down on the floor to look at the little shrine in the corner. It was a smaller version of the Buddha in my room, sitting back on his haunches with a grin. On the floor around him was the same array as on my dresser, just slightly different stuff. Instead of quarters, there were pennies. Instead of matches, there were silver bobby pins.

"Untitled, American Legion Post 135, 2005," M. F. Greco, Photograph

The cigarette wrapper had become the pull from a paycheck. The sucker stick was an unused coffee stirrer.

I squatted down and picked it all up, wondering when Jesus could have done it and why no one had messed with it. When I got back in the chair, I stashed everything in the bag I have on the back. For some reason, leaving it there felt wrong.

I kicked the panel with the floor buttons, and the emergency stop button popped back out. I pushed L again and descended to the world.

I rolled out into the lobby and stopped to think. I decided to go to the Mick first, figuring he'd know about Jesus. The Mick holds court in a rundown house about six blocks from my building, up the hill that eventually goes back down toward the college. My building is downhill from his, so I geared up for the ascent to his house.

He'd been there forever. I'd hit the streets ten years before; he was more than comfortably situated by then. The cops never went near his house. I don't know if he paid them off or if they just didn't really care. The Mick was fairly harmless, he barely broke the law with the gambling; he didn't deal, and he didn't pimp. Furthermore, he doesn't condone people who do. He always said there were levels of sin.

When I got to the house, I stopped to pick up a rock. There was a short flight of stairs to the door and if someone was on the porch, they'd usually help me up. No one was out, so I chucked the rock at in the general direction of the doorbell, hoping not to break the little window beside the door. Luckily, with my perfect aim, I managed to hit the door, not the window.

The Mick opened the door a crack and looked out. All I could really see was a tuft of white hair and one wide-open, bloodshot eye. When he saw it was me, he came out onto the porch. He was wearing a white T-shirt, pristine, and black pinstriped pants. His stomach hung over his waistband like the sun, eclipsing his feet anytime he looked down.

"Stanley. How's business?" He leaned against the railing leading up the stairs.

"It's fine, Mick. I had an interesting visit this morning from Joey Jakes. Know anything about that?"

He crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows in innocence. "No, man. I haven't seen Joey since they got Jesus Freak last night. What did he want."

Ahh, which to start with? I wanted to hear the news about Jesus, but didn't want to seem too desperate. Oh well, plow right in as my mother always said.

"What exactly happened to Jesus last night?"

The Mick chuckled. "Well, as usual, he was betrayed by the one closest to him. Well, not really closest. Joey called in a tip about vandalism, and then the cops came. Simple enough, but they found him beaten to a pulp." The Mick's smile drew down.

"So, you threw the odds then set him out for the wolves?" Admittedly, I was pissed. Bad enough Mick cheated, but I couldn't figure out why the Mick would have him beaten. He'd never done that sort of thing before.

"I don't like that one bit. I never meant for him to be hurt. He was a sacrifice of sorts, but he was supposed to go down quiet and smooth. He even knew what was coming. I told him last week to prepare him, and I gave him a book to pay him off. I didn't have him beaten, just arrested."

"What was the book?"

The Mick sat on the stoop. "Nothing important, just something I got at the college library book sale. Some book comparing Buddhism to Christianity, showing the history of both."

I sat back in my chair, realizing that I'd been leaning forward the whole time. My back muscles moaned, reminding me that I'd climbed the hill. The Mick refused to look at me while I stretched, pity dripping from his eyes.

"Well, is Jesus in jail or is he in the hospital or what?" I asked.

The Mick looked at me for a moment. "What business do you have with him, Stanley? He owe you money or something?"

"Nope, just curious. Joey visited me this morning and brought it up, so I came up to find out the whole story."

The Mick's eyes brightened up. "What did Joey want with you?"

I told him about Joey waking me up, shaking me down. He barely moved during the story, but his face was cloudy. "Well, I didn't send him. By my books, you paid up on the last deal and haven't been back in a while. I've missed your company, kiddo." He sat down on the first step. "I gotta talk to that Joey about freelancing. I've been hearing lots of things about bully tactics. His freelancing is messing with my business."

Admittedly, it was hard to take the Mick's business too seriously sometimes, at least until Jesus got hurt. I'd had respect for the man before he admitted to throwing his games; he was usually fair about money, and he never demanded more that his due. Sometimes he let me crash at his place when I was too tired to wheel back to the hovel in the sky. He was a generally good guy, so I could see how Joey's newfound sense of freedom was bothersome for him. He didn't want the good thing he had going to become a complication, and he certainly didn't want the cops to notice his trade. I guess the Mick was right; some sins are worse than others.

The Mick grinned, flashing some very tobacco stained teeth. "You know, Stanley, I've always liked you. I could use you in the business; the cops never notice cripples. Maybe I should kick Joey out, bring you in."

"No man, you know I can't do that. It's just the betting. I don't wanna get into anything involving money collection. Seems wrong." I regretted letting that slip.

"Ah, so the Butcher has a conscience. Interesting. All these years, I always figured you for another guy on the streets."

I laughed. "For the most part I am. I do want to talk to Joey though, ask him about Jesus. I wonder about that beating. Know where he is?"

"I don't know, kiddo. All I know is he is nowhere near the college. Stay away from there." He stood up to go back inside.

I smiled. "Thanks, Mick. Sorry about being mad, but I just want to talk to this girl."

"Right. Come back later; I got a fresh game to bet on. There's some weird stuff lately on the street, weird like Jesus Freak. Something about statues, I'm looking into it."

I'd been rolling backwards to get ready to take off, not really listening, until I heard statues. "What kind of statues?"

"I don't know yet, just people been finding some weird little statues. You seen any?"

I shook my head. Mick shrugged his shoulders, smiled, twiddled his index finger goodbye in my direction, and then went back inside to his bookkeeping and soaps.

I coasted down the hill toward the school, figuring the Mick was protecting his guy, or he had some other interest in Joey in light of Jesus. My arms still ached from the climb up the hill to the Mick's house, so I was kind of glad Joey was downhill from me. When I got to the campus, I decided to start with the gym locker room, mostly cause I could've used a shower. Another advantage of a wheelchair is that college students don't question your presence in their space.

After my shower, I tried to decide where on campus to start looking for Joey. I thought about the quad, and then I thought about Joey coasting for allies. If he was going to take on the Mick, he needed some help, and college kids were always easy to persuade. Jesus and I used to talk them into helping us all the time. We'd look for the ones who'd volunteer at the weekly Hari Krishna free food-a-thon. They always were willing to do anything to feel like they'd changed the world.

As I rolled to the quad, I thought about how Jesus found out my secret. He'd run into me outside of a diner close to the hovel. He talked me into going in with him, saying I looked like I could use some cheering up.

The tired waitress took us to a booth so I could sit at the edge, took our drink order, coffee for both, and left. I grabbed a menu, just to have something to look at other than his face. Jesus sometimes made me want to hide, like he could read all of the bad things going on in my head. He pulled a pack of crushed cigarettes out of the top pocket of his Goodwill special shirt, along with a box of kitchen matches. He tapped a cigarette out of the pack and lit it, exhaling heavily after the initial drag. I kept staring at the pictographic menu designed for the tired, drunk, or uneducated masses that frequent diners in the seedy part of college towns. I focused on the picture of a smiling pancake, the kids' sunny-side up special. I tried to mimic the bacon strips and pulled my lips up into a grin.

I looked over at him, trying to see if my attempt at a pleasant facial expression was working. He was looking at me, as if reading my mind.

"Stanley," he started, hesitantly, "I know all about you."

My smile faded. "What do you mean?"

Jesus sighed, sadness expelling from his lungs with the smoke. "Stanley, I know your secret. What I don't know is why."

The waitress returned with our coffees and a handful of creamers. She asked if we were ready to order, her nose wrinkled as if she could smell our lack of mommy and daddy's money. Jesus told her to give us some time. I took a sip of the hot coffee, trying to clear my head, trying to clear the dullness from the shock.

"Ok. So what's my big secret?"

Jesus smiled placidly. "Well, I know you can walk."

I nodded at him to go on, while I sipped some more of the coffee.

"I figured it out when you wore those wool socks I gave you for Christmas."

"How?"

Jesus smiled brightly. Apparently she had paid attention to the sunny-side up special. "You would complain about your feet itching."

"How did he know about me?"

I laughed at that. I had been covering my tracks so well, but I trusted Jesus. I got comfortable around him, at least enough to admit to potential athlete's foot. "Well, good for you, your brain cells fire more often than I gave you credit for, after all."

Jesus scowled. "I don't think it's funny. Why do you keep yourself in that chair?"

I sat looking out the dingy window, trying to understand why I was staring out the dingy window instead of coming clean. Jesus lit another cigarette, and the waitress returned for our orders. I dimly heard Jesus tell the waitress that we'd only be having coffee.

We sat in silence. I thought about Jesus and my Buddha. I swallowed down the fear and the dregs of my now cold coffee. Our waitress really sucked.

"I got the wheelchair from my mother's garage before I left home. It was my grandmother's, but she'd died."

Jesus tugged his earlobe. "Why'd you take it?" He sipped her coffee. "Was it to make sure you'd make money panhandling?"

I looked over at him. "No. I took it because I had to see what it was like, stuck in a chair."

I felt my heart racing and my face growing red. Jesus raised his eyebrows, silently asking me what my problem was. My problem was big. There was no reason for me to tell Jesus any of this. I tried to decide whether or not I should just move on. There was no reason for me to be sitting there. All of a sudden, I felt

an urge to stand up and run out of the restaurant.

This time, Jesus really did read my mind. "Stanley, don't be scared. I'll keep your secret. I'm mostly just curious."

That seemed to work; my life story tumbled out of my mouth. I told him how I'd put my sister in a wheelchair when she was ten and I was sixteen. I stuck around for a couple of years after that. Mom had her put in a home, and I visited her everyday. No one blamed me. It was an accident.

We had been playing in the woods; I was teaching her how to camp before she went on her summer trip with the Girl Scouts. She really wanted to get her badges that summer; it was all she talked about. We were crossing a stream, well, more like a small river. She slipped. I ran to get help, and once we got her out of the water, and the ambulance got there, she'd woken up, but she couldn't move her legs. The doctors told us that she wouldn't be able to walk and something about hitting her back just right on the rocks. No one blamed me.

I left because I couldn't face her anymore. She could move her arms a little, but her legs were shriveled little branches, limp and useless. I wanted to trade with her. I wanted to punish myself since no one else would.

After I told Jesus the story, he sat quietly, sipping his coffee the waitress finally refilled. Finally, he spoke. "No one blames you." With that, Jesus stood, pulled me from the table, left a five for the crappy waitress, then pushed me out, past the empty booths, past the empty hostess station, out to the empty street.

After that, Jesus never mentioned it again. We stuck to amateur religious debates and discussion of the weather. He was good on his word; he never told anyone the secret. I owed him.

When I got to the quad, I decided to sit in the sun and keep an eye out for Joey. It seemed strangely deserted, then I realized that it was Sunday. Kids were all asleep in their dorms.

I hadn't seen my sister in ten years. I didn't know whether or not she was still alive. I started sweating, realizing that she might have really lost it when I left. I wouldn't blame her, really; I never said goodbye, just stole our dead grandmother's wheelchair from the garage and wheeled out of her life. I abandoned her, and I abandoned my mother.

I thought about Buddha. He always smiled, even though he preached suffering as a natural way of life. He danced his way into sainthood, waving his hat at his followers. At least, that's what the little statues tell me. All I could figure was the Buddha means calm, but not stagnant boredom.

After a while, I heard someone walk up behind me, the grass crunching underfoot. I smelled desperation and old sweat. Joey. I slowly turned the chair around in the manicured grass to face him. We locked glares. He flashed his shark teeth. I kept stoney faced. Any minute, I thought, we'll draw and shoot. I started wondering if it was high noon on the quad.

Finally, Joey broke the silence. "Hi, Stanley."

I nodded.

"What're you doing here?" he growled.

"I want to know what happened to Jesus."

"What do you care?"

I rolled over his foot, then tried not to laugh when he cursed. "I care because he'd my friend. He's not some playing piece in one of your games with the Mick.

Joey grimaced, still rubbing his toes. He looked like a pissed off stork. "What game you mean, my walleyed, crippled friend."

Ignoring the insults, I went on. "Why did you beat him up?"

Joey pulled up his yarmulke to scratch his bald spot. "You ever read about Job?"

I nodded.

"Well, I wanted to see if he'd help me out against the Mick. We need a change of scenery on the hill. Well, Jesus refused. I mean, the Mick threw his bet, threw him out to the pigs. I just wanted to help him out."

"So, putting him in the hospital helped him how?"

Joey's eyes darted around. "He said no. He said he didn't owe any allegiance to anyone. He kept babbling about some Zen shit, something about life unfolding and being neutral."

Jesus had taken up Buddhism with a vengeance. I felt a prickle at the corner of my left eye, a tear for getting Jesus into that mess to begin with. I should never have told him why I kept that Buddha, that reminder of suffering.

Joey stared at me, starting to smile. He'd finally stopped pouting over his foot. "Speaking of which, you wanna go into business. I could use someone to roll with, someone who knows how to bring people to their knees."

I rolled over his other foot, bringing him to his knees. "You mean like this, Joey. No. Like Jesus, I don't owe anyone anything. Besides, I think I need to get off the streets for a while."

I rolled backwards away from Joey, keeping my eyes on him. He stayed put, rubbing his foot, face [illegible] I kept moving backwards, then turned around and rolled back downhill to the Mick's.

When I got there, the Mick was on the front stoop, playing golf solitaire. He looked down at me, [illegible] me to start talking.

[illegible] 's Jesus, Mick?"

[illegible] "He's at the university hospital. That's the only place that would take him in with no insu[illegible]

[illegible] tly what happened, don't you?"

[illegible] s eyes tired and drooping. "I know how it looks, Stanley. I just couldn't have Joey takin[illegible] tomers. He's out of the business now, though. Jesus didn't deserve that on

account of Joey's ego."

I sat there for a while, watching the Mick finish his game. He cheated four times, making sure he'd win. I wasn't terribly surprised.

"Stanley, none of this really matters in the long run. I know this. You and Jesus have the right idea Just keep out of it. I'll settle Joey."

I nodded and stood up. The Mick dropped his flip deck on the porch as I walked up the three stairs. He stood up, and I put my hand out for him to shake. He took it. I turned around and left him standing on the porch.

I walked up the hill. The sun framed the hospital, giving the building a silver lining. I walked in and asked for Jesus Freak's room number. The nurse told me. I never would have thought that was his real name.

When I walked into the room, Jesus winked at me. He patted the space left on his hospital bed. We talked about suffering. We talked about Joey and the Mick and their little games. We talked about the weather. Finally, we talked about my sister. I left Jesus there, satisfied that he'd be fine without me. I walked out of the hospital and back down the hill to my new life.

"Rhinocerangel," Dean Miller, Ink on Fine Paper

"Untitled," Elizabeth Bedell, Mixed Media

"Untitled," Digital Photograph, Luciana Caniero

The Shotgun Blast Toe-Tap

by John Stockel

dance with me as i play the shotgun blast
toe-tap your way to heaven
smoky winding jazz bar blues guitarist sets the tempo
for the dance
the strung out white faces eyes closed
snapping fingers in time with the drip drip drip drip
of the saline waterfall runoff cover-up
as she dances around the room and expects everything of no one
but perfection in the sensual swaying of her hips and the flow of her step
this night is her perfect performance
silent standing ovation as she takes one last bow

History of the Motion Picture

by Rob Adair

1400 watts of light broke through the darkness
What was once… A still-life portrait of a fading dream
Scratched out words in a notebook with broken seams
A cover with smeared black ink
The perfect story

Memories long forgotten and buried
Decaying on love's battlefield
After a long fought war
The dust settled and the firefight ceased
Too many lost lives
It ends with a treaty

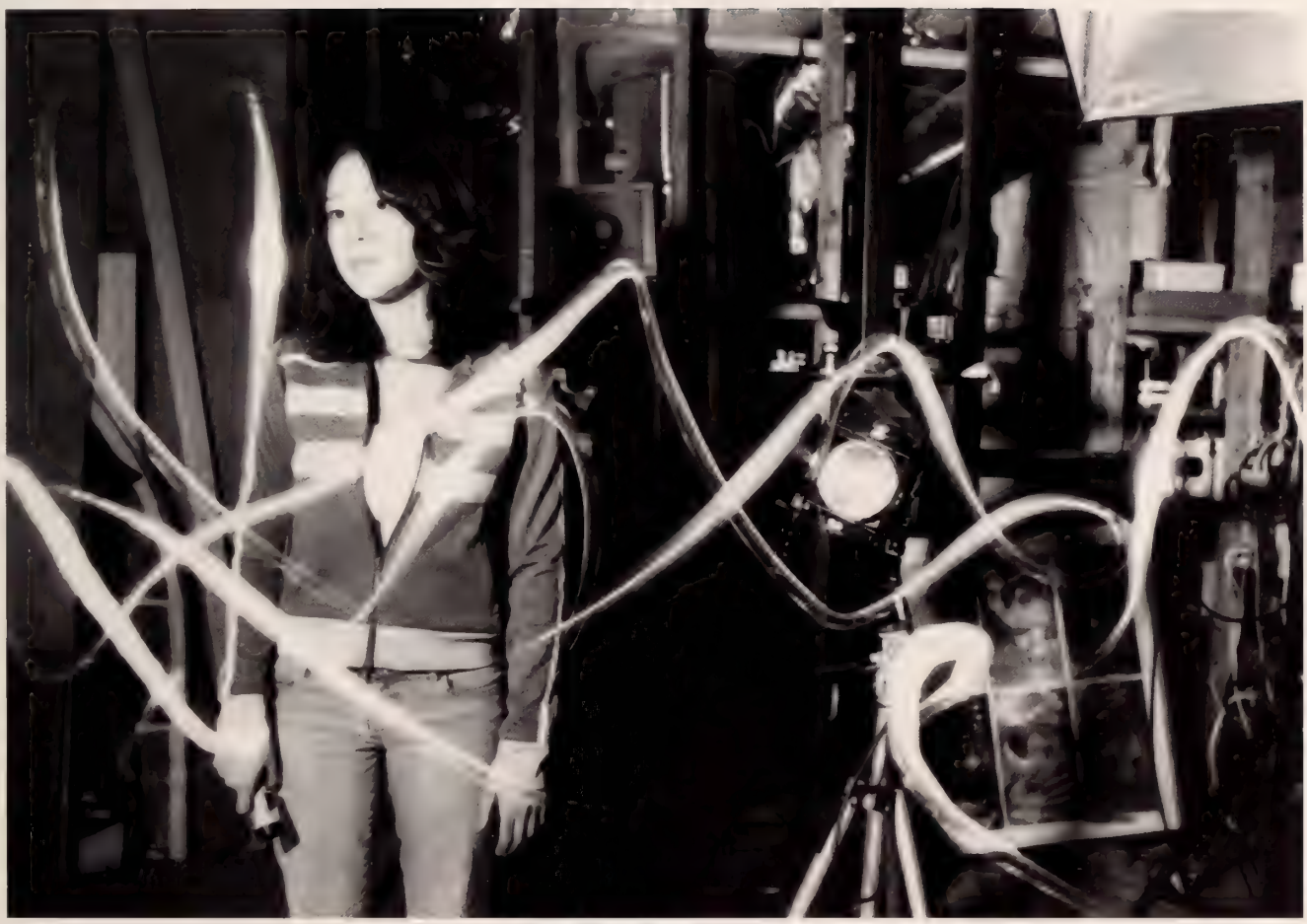
"You're right, maybe we aren't meant for each other"

You said I don't understand
"This pain can only be carried by me
It's not your fault but just let me be!"
I surrender and remain wounded
Yet refuse care, my wounds only worsen
Now that you are not there

The dream has now vanished
For it was only a dream
A portrait remains stagnant
Staged in a picturesque fantasy
The smiles a façade
The joy a masquerade
Anything to hide the truth of our ways

{Enter stage left}
A rate of 48 frames a second
A spectrum of black and grays
This is my *Casablanca*, my *Charade*
Talk of conquest over coffee
Stupid jokes and political conspiracy theories
Between the awkward silence
It's you and me on the silver screen
Waltzing through our thoughts and dreams

The perfect story could not be written
It can only be lived
Forget the orchestra and the on cue tears
Bring forth the cheap dinners
The long drives to nowhere
How it ends is yet to be seen
But I thank God
That even if it was just for a moment
You've cleansed me of the fears I once carried



"Scattered Fiction," Mia Montgomery, Silver Gelatin Print

Love Knows No Time

Travis J. Wallace

My girlfriend told me she LOVE me
we've been together five months and she already LOVE me
I's only five if I stretch it a little,
but since the first time I saw her pretty face there was LOVE in the middle
so that leaves her and I and the end
so we had a ménage à and from the trois relations began
at first she didn't wanna let me in
but if LOVE knocks once I's not leavin' like Jehovah's witness
at least let me appeal to emotion's senses
wrap you in LOVE like a Hershey's kisses
take the wrapper off cause I's so delicious
and now I feel like she could be my Mrs., and I could be her Mr. Buddy LOVE
so Ms. Purdy give your man a hug, or better yet tell Rudy that my name ain't BUD
but my last name Jones and my first is LOVE
so if your last name Jones then I LOVE to hug LOVE to kiss in time reminisce
of how this rose bud blossomed and lead to bliss, SWEET SADIE,
reminiscent of a lady, Holiday....Billie singin' songs that sway me
Ol' school R&B songs of LOVE makin'
Ordinary People livin' LOVE amazing,
Amazing LOVE livin' in Hearts places
In LOVE and out I feel like I trade places
In LOVE I stay with BEAUTY amazing
In LOVE I stay with a mind thas adjacent
In verse I write my passion to MY LADY.

Merry-Go-Round of a Memory

by Mia Montgomery

I cut the moon in half
And stole the stars
I placed them all on sticks
And went around the merry-go-round

Did you forget that time
Time of childhood games
Whistles, plastic cars, and it's all the same
Let's do it again

I cut the moon in half
And stole the stars
I placed them all on sticks
And went around the merry-go-round
All to see if you would remember again
But you didn't make a sound

Watching the broken moon fade away
Sparked an old memory of . . .

Never growing up
Staying in my field of ladybugs and hugs
Rolling around on the lawn
Staying up till dawn

Come back to the dream
Of bursting lights of fireflies,
The moon, and the stars
Let them collide into our
Everyday morning glory of sunshine
Let's make them blissfully ours again

Woman

by Autumn Flynn

Feet in the stirrups, at the wall I squint,
Where a dancer's poise appears effortless.
Degas' dame leaps, not a step does she miss,
As I (and this belly fat with life) lament.
It was a cruel trick to hang such a print
In an obstetrician's office like this
Next to posters of ovarian cysts
And women with cups over toilets bent.
"This is woman," whispered she to me.
What did she know with her quaint pointed toe,
Rosettes and tulle skirt floating about her?
"Under my satin slippers lie gnarled feet
From hours of practice and bone-breaking woe.
Discomfort is woman." That, I concur.

"Untitled," Digital Photograph, Luciana Caniero

Truth

by Erin Christian

As each blade of grass and the petal of every flower is cleansed after the kiss of morning dew, thus am I renewed after I close my eyes and my soul meets yours.

I melt under your smiling gaze as softly as ice sickles thaw when winter is in its death throes; my walls trickle down into meaningless puddles leaving me
vulnerable
bare
warm
eager
open

To hold your hand in mine is to take hold of all the world and all its splendor, it is to know what it is to truly be alive
and feel the vibrant electricity of life coursing through my veins.

To dance with you is to dance among the stars and know no bounds of earthly time or reason, but to surrender
with wild abandon
to the eternal music of the universe and lose myself in its pounding rhythm.

To know you is to know no fear, but to feel worries and doubts weakly submit themselves to be consumed by the flames of lust for adventure.

To hear you sing
with the joy in your heart
resounding with such a force, as if all the earth were rejoicing with you,
brings crystal tears of passion streaming down my cheeks.

To say we have seen three years pass since we first spoke
is to say we've but lived in the blink of an eye compared to all of the changing seasons that lay before us
let me change and grow with you.

Your love
your friendship
your soul is so bright
strong
and full of promise
that I yearn to bask in its light forever.

Sunset

by John Stockel

every day i
search for the one
girl who i can give my life to
and every night i find her
right where i left her
in my dreams

and when i wake
up in the morning
i understand why the sun
can only take sitting still for so long
before heading back to sleep
to make way for the moon

but i still
dont understand
how you can kiss me
and strip me of my clothes
soaking wet from discovering angels
in the freshly fallen snow of your front yard
only to kiss me goodbye nine short hours later
as i board a 747 back to the Georgia Sun
and you somehow forget all about me
in the midst of a time difference
that keeps me up one extra
hour past happiness
to pretend i can
sit and watch
the sunset
fade with
you

"Untitled," Crystal Poole Dummitt, Silver Gelatin Print

Adventure

by Erin Christian

I opened my bloodshot eyes and beheld a new world

I saw a rose colored dawn break over a never before seen horizon and after seemingly endless sleepless torment, I felt the unfamiliar stirring of joy within my breast.

I had endured hours of rocking and shaking, listening to those around me snore in their peaceful repose, doubting and fretting, crying and regretting, all to find hope in clouds bathed in ethereal golden light.

Emerging from an everlasting night of darkness and despair, I absorbed the promise of the dawn in my soul and allowed adventure to seduce my heart again.

I was in a silver capsule, hurtling across tracks and through tunnels toward a destination the farthest from home I'd ever been, a destination I never dreamed I'd reach.

Heroes

by Joe O'Connor

It was in times past that heroes would carry swords. They would hold their shields high to protect their brothers in line. When the time came to push the enemy back together, these men would march, confident that their brothers would protect them. Men would fall to protect their brothers in arms.

In those days, men were to come back carrying their shields high or being carried on them. It was better that a man died than for him to have thrown his shield away, for in throwing away his shield, he threw away his brother's life. Men who died to protect their brothers were revered; those who froze in panic were unmentionable.

Men in the days of yore knew war. They could smell it on the wind, that grand fire which men crave. They could hear it in the bellowing of their kinsmen. They would see the foe and know him. Men on both sides were just that: men. After the battles they would go home to bask in the love of their families. They would cherish their wives and play with their children and they would not take these happy times for granted. These memories would be their lifeblood on the plains of war. They would fight in hopes they would return for more happy times but with the foreknowledge that fate might have other plans.

It was all in the hands of their brothers on those battlefields long ago. Today is no different.

Don't Give Me

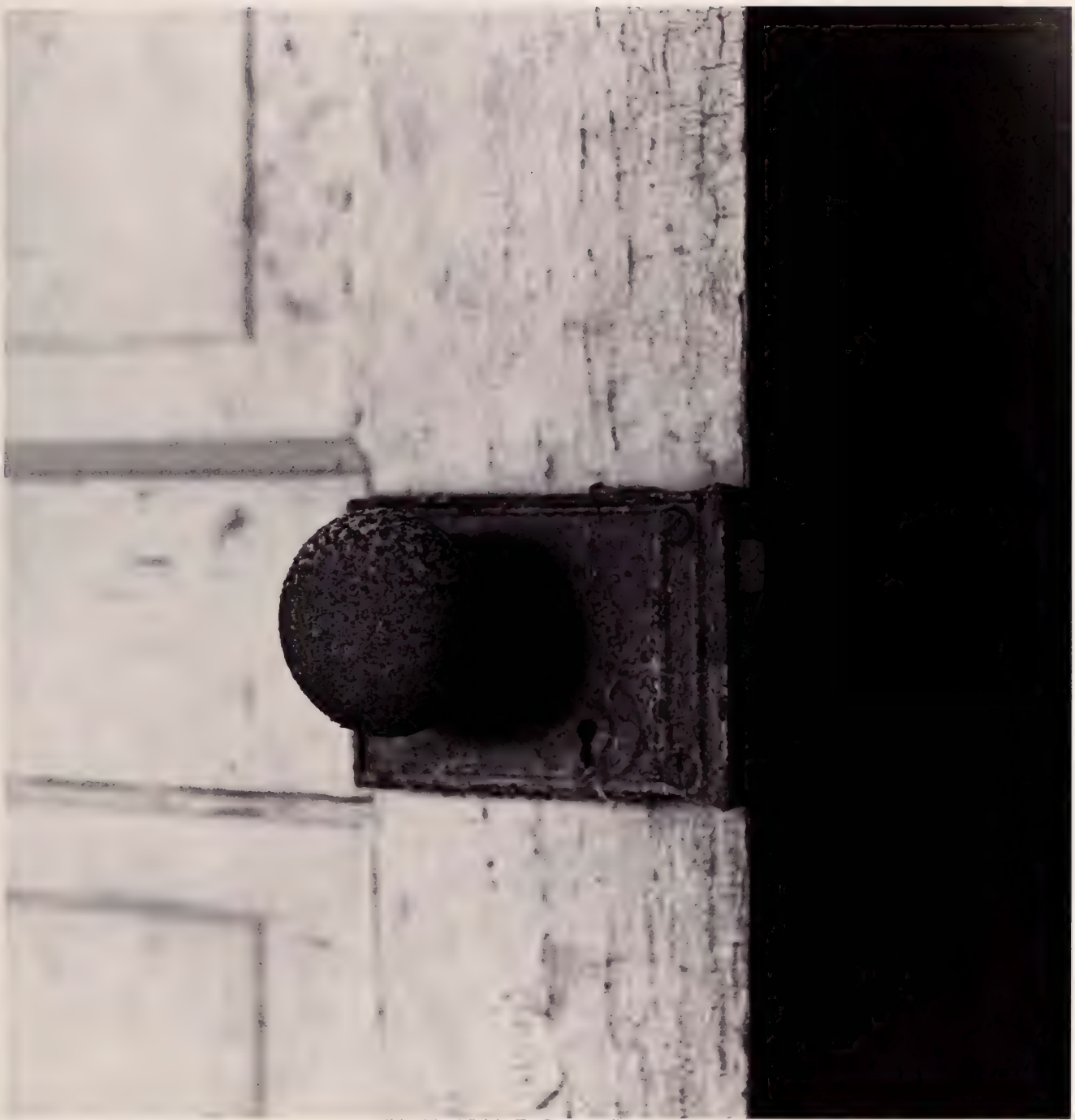
by Amanda Mathis

I must be strong,
(I don't want the flag.)
I must pretend,
(Please don't give me the flag.)
It can't be.
(Don't play the horn - that sad, sad song.)
My ears cannot stand it;
My heart hates it.
I love you - I don't want it past tense.
I need you - Why can't you stay?
This was always a possibility,
but why now, but why ever?
(Don't give me the flag.)
The regulation folding,
The stern, but sympathetic soldiers before me—
My heart is never to be the same now that
I have the flag.

Creating a New Dream

by Mia Montgomery

I wanted to take you in
And be lost in you
You gave me a reason
To lose count of the stars
And each dream I had wished upon them
I don't want the empty spaces in my life
To win
Open up all my doors
Clean out the webs and traps
Open up a new beginning for me
You will have to run to the middle
While I walk
'Cause right now I'm walking with a limp
I'm trying to keep my heart steady
As I get ready
To meet you in the middle
When we meet
I'll make a new wish upon a star
And create a new dream



"Untitled," M. F. Greco, Photograph

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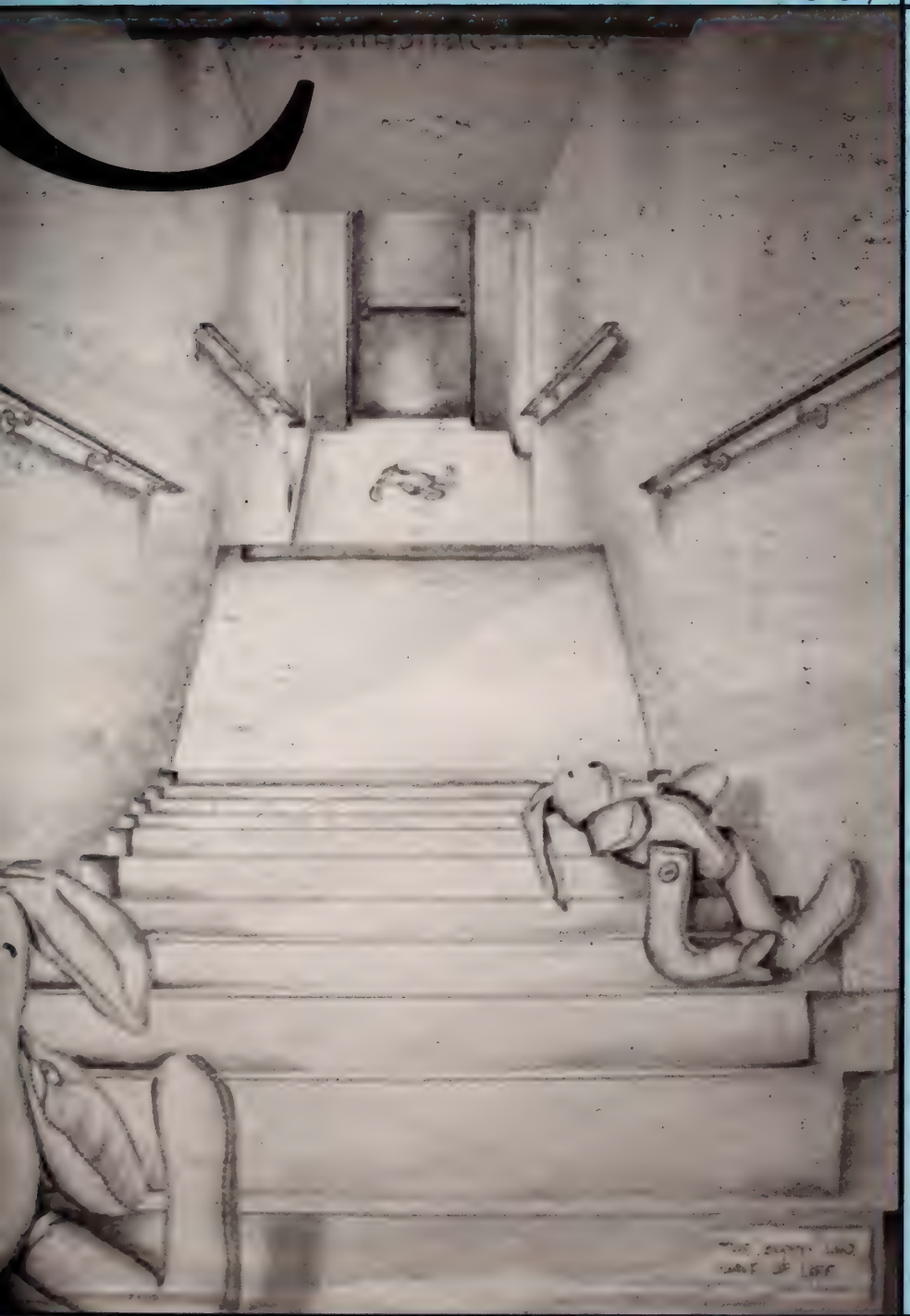
2007



Calliope 2007

Armstrong Atlantic State University
Volume XXIII

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Calliope is published annually by and for the students of Armstrong Atlantic State University. The Student Government Association of AASU provides funding for each publication. Student submissions are collected through the fall semester for the following year's publication. All submissions are read and chosen through an anonymous process to ensure equal opportunity for every entrant. The Lillian Spencer Awards are presented for outstanding submissions in fiction, poetry, and art. The recipients of this award are chosen by the staff from the student submissions received that year.

Calliope 2007 submission guidelines: Regardless of medium, each entrant is limited to five submissions. Each entry must have a completed submission form. To ensure anonymity during the selection process, the Calliope staff asks that you not include your name or any identification on your submitted work. If submitting large art pieces, please attach a removable index card with your information on the back of your work.

For more information, or if interested in working on the 2008 *Calliope* staff, please contact Dr. Christopher Baker in the Languages, Literature and Philosophy department located in Gamble Hall.

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Dagny

Chalk Pastel

Mia Montgomery

Lillian Spencer Award Winner for Art

Randall

Dave Williams

Lillian Spencer Award Winner for Short Fiction

Me and Randall, we is real good friends. I guess that we been friends since we could barely walk. Both of us grew up off Highway 25. Takes about twenty minutes to walk to his front door and I been making that walk all of my life. When you grow up out in the country, you pretty much latch on to whoever is around. I always known he was a little crazy, but I guess that's 'cause his daddy ain't right. I once saw his daddy shoot one of Bill Johnson's cows in the face with an AK-47 just to do it. Mama says that he sells drugs, but it sure don't seem like it. Seems like they is way too poor to sell drugs. Drug dealers on T.V. drive Bentleys and Mercedes. Randall's daddy drives an old beat up El Camino covered in rust. He used to drive a dune buggy.

Randall stays pretty quiet around other people, but when it's just the two of us he won't shut up. He's always going on and on 'bout hunting and Iron Maiden and stuff. Kids we go to school with don't really care bout that stuff. I suppose some of 'em like hunting but not the way we do it. They hunt deer. Them kids in high school don't always treat us so nice neither. We pretty much keep to ourselves. We used to eat lunch out in the parking lot with the rednecks until Keith Quarrels punched me in the chest. Those boys live in the mill village and they treat us like trash, so Randall and I decided to start eating in the cafeteria with the blacks and the preps. We'd sit by ourselves near the trash cans. That's where Randall loved to sit cause he could stare at Suzi Owens. She sat right in the middle of the preps, and Randall would just stare at her all throughout lunch. I'd try to talk to him about Stone Cold Steve Austin and guns and stuff, but he just kept talking bout Suzi.

"What do you think her pussy tastes like?" he'd ask. "I don't know man. What's wrong with you?" He would just stare at her legs as we ate. "Bet it tastes like muscodines. Bet she uses so many lotions and keeps it so clean and stuff that it tastes like sweet sweet fruit." I had never tasted no girl before. Randall said that he'd had a bunch of girls, but the only girl I ever remember him spending time with was his cousin Chandi and she was just now thirteen. Chandi lost her arm when it got infected. It looked real gross at first. Now it's just a nub.

Randall had found himself obsessed. I'd had a crush on a girl here and there growing up, like Carmen Electra or Chandi, but this was getting out of hand. Me and Randall would still hang out, but he wanted to do all kinds of freaky things. He tried to convince me to drive him over to Suzi's house on my four wheeler at midnight so he could go through their trash. He had himself convinced that if he could find some panties or a tampon or something that he could cast a spell over her. Like, he wanted to start a fire and listen to some Slayer and chant and all that. He was getting all kinds of perverted. I guessed that was 'cause his daddy wasn't right.

I wasn't quite sure that Randall's daddy was selling drugs, but I figured he must have used them. He was up 'til all hours cleaning his guns and yelling at Randall. I found lots of them little flowers that you can get at the gas station all over their house. One

time when my Mama was real sad about my stepdaddy hitting her and all, I brought her one of them flowers on the way home from school. When I gave it to her she explained to me that drug smokers used them little glass pipes that the flowers came in to smoke their drugs. I guess they must make a pretty good pipe. People can be real sneaky like that.

It was a Monday when Principal Wheeler announced over the loud speaker that Suzi had died. Kids was crying in the halls and stuff. I didn't really know her real well. She never talked to me or even looked my way. I could just imagine Randall crying his eyes out like a little baby and everybody wondering what was up. Suzi never talked to him neither. She was a cheerleader. She lived in a neighborhood with a gate. They build them gates to keep people like Randall out. I guess to keep Randall out of their trash.

Suzi's daddy had been drinking and he ran a stop sign near the mall. He drove one of them big SUVs, but it didn't help 'em none when it flipped. He was a city councilman or something. Maybe he was a dentist. They said that Suzi had died on impact. That made everybody feel better that she didn't have to suffer or nothing. People was saying that Suzi's daddy loved to drink. I thought everybody's daddy loved to drink.

They was planning on letting school out early for her funeral. They said that half the town was going to be there. I was gonna stay home and try to watch them dirty channels on the satellite that my stepdaddy kept locked. I knew that if I was alone for a while that I could figure out the code.

When I ran into Randall after shop class, I was pretty sure that he would be sad. Randall wasn't much for crying, but I expected him to seem depressed or something. He didn't seem like it had bothered him at all. In fact, he seemed pretty normal. That day we didn't sit in the cafeteria at lunch. Randall convinced me to skip the rest of the day and go back to my house 'cause my parents wasn't home. We hopped onto the short bus and caught a ride down Highway 25. The retards get out early from school and, if you act real quiet, the bus driver don't ask no questions.

When we got to my house, Randall found my stepdaddy's vodka, Mr. Boston's. Then he got out a bottle of my Mama's Boone's Farm, and we mixed them up and drank some. I tried to figure out the satellite code, but I couldn't. Randall kept making toasts to Suzi Owens. I didn't know what to say to him, so I just kept on drinking. The funeral was going to be the next day, and I thought that Randall would go to it and get all his emotions out there. I told him that the viewing was gonna be that night and that he should go there and pay his respects to the Owens family. I don't really know if it was the Mr. Boston's and Boone's Farm talking, but I figured that they would appreciate Randall's condolences.

"Are you crazy, man? They don't care what I have to say. Them people would look at me like I was some kind of idiot. I might as well be black going up there sayin I'm sorry." I shook my head. "Randall, there's gonna be black people there. Half the town is gonna be there." Randall didn't seem to like what I had said. "Well, that will just make them feel worse to know that she was friends with them blacks anyway. First she dies and now this. They've gone through enough already."

We laid around on the floor like we was good for nothing. The drinking had nearly put us to sleep by 3. At one point I thought I saw a tear running down Randall's cheek, but I was pretty drunk. Most of the day he seemed like he didn't mind at all. It wasn't

like Suzi had ever really even looked in his direction except for to spit. Me and Randall ain't popular or nothing. We was in 4H for a while, but that don't make you popular.

Then all of the sudden Randall jumped up like a ninja. "We gotta go down to that funeral parlor right now." I was stunned that he was even talking, let alone up on his feet and ready for action. "How you suppose we gonna get there, Randall?" I asked, and when I asked I nearly started vomiting all of my breakfast on the carpet. Randall grabbed me by the collar and stood me up. "I need to see her one last time. I suppose you ain't gonna stop me from that are you? We gonna take your four wheeler and some fishing poles, and if we see any police we'll just pretend like we was fishing." Randall has a way of getting real excited about stuff. When he gets all excited, it's hard to say no. It's like you get caught up in the way he is feeling. Like, you get all excited with him and like I said, I had been drinking. "I don't know if I can drive right now, Randall" He gave me a look, and I knew what he was thinking. Before he could call me a sissy or a lightweight, I threw him my keys and within seconds we was slamming that screen door behind us and out on that road.

The fall air always feels so nice. I guess it's kinda chilly but not cold. It just has a way of waking you up and kinda like reminding you that you is alive. It was slapping against the side of my face real fast like, and I was holding onto Randall across his stomach. I always did hate riding on the back. Even when we was just riding bicycles. Randall's daddy used to make fun of us and call us fags 'cause we rode like this. He said that it reminded him of prison. We never found that funny at all. This was the only way we had to get from one place to another, and we didn't like it neither.

I watched the side of Randall's face, and I thought I saw another tear. It could have been cause we was riding so fast, and it could have been a bug or something. Randall wasn't much for crying. For a minute there, I felt real sorry for him. It was like he was something special to me. Like we was family or something. It was kinda like we was, because his daddy ain't right and my stepdaddy is always beating on my mama. For a second there it felt like we was all that the other one had in the whole world. I felt real bad about Randall and about Suzi, and it seemed like it was even sadder that she had never even looked at Randall. Like there was this whole other universe out there somewhere where she had looked at him and they was married with kids, and like they had a nice house, like a double wide or something in one of them gated communities and I bet you that in Randall's dreams they did. Like the world, this world, had snatched that chance away from them, but in some weird way that would always keep it alive too, 'cause now Randall would always have them dreams, forever.

I was feeling real bad for Randall then we stopped at a gas station, and I puked while he hopped off and went inside. It was about five minutes before he had come back, and I had wiped all the sick offa my face with pages of the phonebook attached to the pay phone in the parking lot. "You ready? 'Cause we gotta have a plan." Randall yelled as he cranked my four wheeler back up. "I'm gonna go around back and you can go around front. I know there's a door where they drop off them bodies in the back, and I'm gonna sneak up in it. You go to the front and try to talk to whoever is in there about bodies and death and stuff. Tell them that you is a doctor and you need some brains to experiment on." I knew that this wouldn't work, but I was feeling so bad for Randall that I would have agreed to anything. Remember, I felt like we was family.

When we got to the mortuary, I was convinced that what we was doing was right. Randall hopped off and ran to the back of the building. I was all on my own. I was gonna have to distract the people that deal with them bodies while Randall paid his last respects, and I had no idea what to do. I stumbled to the front of the building and walked right in through the front door. This place had a weird smell like you wouldn't believe. It wasn't dead bodies or nothing, like rotting and all. That would be really gross. No, it smelled more like chemicals and odorizers and stuff. Kinda like that old folks home that my granny used to live in before she passed.

The man at the front of the building was old himself, and he had his hair combed over on the top of his bald head like he was gonna fool people or something. "Hello son, what can I do for you?" He was a big tall fat man, and he was walking at me real quick. Now I don't know whether it was the chemical smell or the thought of all of them bodies, or just the Mr. Boston's, but I started feeling real sick again. I looked that old bald fat man in the eye and I began to say, "I'm a doctOOAAAHHH," but I was puking all down the front of his shirt and tie. He looked at me like I was less than garbage, and he called out somebody's name. This old lady came running from the back, and she was pretty disgusted herself because I heard her choking back some vomit.

I put my head down in my hands for a second and then something struck me even funnier. Why would Randall want these people to be distracted? Why did we have to come here anyway? I know that he said that he wanted to say his last goodbyes and all, but why did he have to be alone? I began to think that he was up to something that just wasn't right, and that made me wanna puke even more; I did. It was all beginning to make sense. Randall wasn't sad. I shouldn't have felt sorry for him at all. He wasn't crying. That boy was damn excited. He had just found himself an opportunity to do something nasty to that girl that wouldn't even look at him, and he was gonna take it. I was certain that Randall was back there having sex with that dead girl's body.

I looked up and began running towards the back of the building. I had to stop him before he had gone too far. When we stopped at that gas station, I bet he was buying one of them lubricated condoms. This wasn't all his daddy's doing neither. It was Randall who wasn't right. As I ran down that mortuary hall, I began puking all along the way. I tried yelling Randall's name, but it was all gurgled by vomit. That old fat bald man started running after me, and that lady that must have been his secretary did too.

My mama never did like me hanging out with Randall, and I should have listened to her. I mean, I like Iron Maiden and Hustler magazine and all, but Randall liked it more. It's one thing talking about her pussy and digging in her trash, but this was going too far. I guess that I am a Christian, and Jesus don't want nobody having sex with dead people. Still, you don't need Jesus to tell you that that just ain't right.

Finally I had made it to this little room that was lit all strange and soft, and there must have been flowers everywhere. There stood Randall in the middle of the room next to the casket. I thought that maybe he was applying lubrication or whispering some kind of demon words to the devil or something, but when I got closer I saw that he was crying like a little baby. That old bald man grabbed us both by our collars and started screaming at us at the top of his lungs, "You little bastards better get out of here before I call the cops!" I started puking again, and Randall grabbed something out of his pocket. It was one of them roses that came in the drug pipes. Randall swung his elbow

around quick and caught that fat man in the neck. Then he took that drug pipe rose and placed it on Suzi's chest.

I got to tell you. Suzi looked weird laying there all dead and stuff. She looked like her, but not like her at all. Randall screamed, "Run!" and the two of us took off out of there like a couple of bullets from his daddy's AK-47, aimed right at one of Bill Johnson's cows. We hopped on my 4-wheeler, and we was gone. This time we didn't try to take the main roads. We tried cutting through the woods. There was several times when we almost hit a tree, but we was lucky to find a lot of trails back there and before we knew it we was back on Highway 25.

Police don't usually come out here unless they is trying to catch out-of-towners speeding. You gotta be stupid driving through here. All them cops wanna do is make money off of them tickets. We was lucky that we made it home at all.

Our ride back was real silent. Randall must have been sad, and I was just trying to get all of my thoughts straight. So he wasn't really trying to have sex with Suzi Owen's dead body. He was just trying to pay his respects with that drug pipe flower and all. When we pulled up on my four wheeler at his daddy's house, Randall's daddy was sitting on the porch with a gun. "Don't y'all look fancy," Randall's daddy said as we climbed off into their yard. Randall's daddy had one of them accents that couldn't no one understand, and it was even worse when he was drinking. The only reason that I can decipher it is 'cause I been hearing him speak all of my life. "You boys look like a nice fancy pair of San Francisco faggots," Randall's daddy laughed and pointed his AK-47 in our direction. We both knew that he wasn't going to shoot. He just liked to mess with our minds when he was drinking. "Go on inside and wax your bikini lines, girls. I think Oprah's on." At this point, he was just muttering to himself.

Randall passed by his daddy without even looking. He pushed through the door and stepped on their dog Jasper's tail on his way to his bedroom. Jasper yelped and ran off. I followed Randall to his room. He kicked off his shoes real high. He laid down flat on his bed, and he wasn't even trying to hide the fact that he was crying. "AWW Shoot!" Randall sobbed as he reached into his back pocket. He grabbed the drug pipe that that flower had come in from the back of his jeans, and he looked up at me with these real sad eyes, "Hey Bo, can you put this on the table in there? My daddy likes to save them."

All the nausea had passed through my body with the vomit, and I wasn't going to be sick no more. I looked into Randall's red watery eyes, and I almost wished that he would have done what I thought he was gonna do. That would have given him, at least, a little bit of satisfaction. Not the real him, but the Randall that I had imagined him to be when I thought that he was gonna do it. I almost wished that he would have done it. I figured that it would have been much easier for me to face the sicko dead sex having Randall in the eyes than it was for me seeing him in this condition.

I grabbed the drug flower pipe from his hand and walked into the other room. I saw Randall's daddy, through the window, taking aim at nothing in the darkness as he pretended to pull the trigger. It seemed like for some reason God had just taken a big old dump on Randall and me, and that life wasn't ever going to get much better, but that was just a passing thought. I walked back into Randall's room and picked up one of his ninja stars. I started playing with it in my hand. Me and Randall, we is real good friends.

Pseudonym

Jessica Martinez
Lillian Spencer Award Winner for Poetry

If I am Jessica Martínez,
you might say to yourself,
perched in an office high-rise,
sky-blue tie and pen in hand,
"I'm sick of all this Latino crap."
So, I can be Jessica Martinez
(*sin acento*)
to dodge that.

Or, better still, Jessica Martin—
bastard child of a murky heritage:
thick tongued, imposter—
una gringa, least of all.
Still, "Jessica…Jessica,"
you might say to yourself,
"I have an ex named Jessica.
I don't like her much."

So, J.M. Martin
doesn't sound so bad—
(no "e" no "z")
J.M. Coetzee may agree.
Besides, there is power
in initials, in becoming
unsexed,
in engendering a new name.

No matter—
when I marry, I shall be
Mrs. William English.
English! (¡of all *apellidos*!)
J.M. English: writer (and/or wife).
I might even have my husband
call me by my pseudonym,
on the days I spend typing,

to remind me who I really am.

For Casey

Geometrical Maze

Drawing
Chad Roberts

Facing the Beast

Mandy Rowe

I stood there with a cold sweat dripping from my hairline just above my temple. I couldn't wipe it away; it would be a sign of weakness. I couldn't allow that, not at a time like this. My very life depended on it. Very slowly, I took a deep breath to calm my nerves, and I noticed the Four-Eyed Beast raise an eyebrow giving it an even more terrifying look. I knew, then, that there was no escape; the monster had caught me. I had to face her once and for all.

I opened my mouth to let out a battle cry, but it quickly died on my lips as I heard a strange rumbling. It was coming from all around the monster. I suddenly remembered to my dismay we were not alone. This time she had brought her Hellhounds and demons to torment me. The rumblings were actually scratchy whispers of her demons trying to provoke me into attacking them. If I did that, it would be all over before it even began.

"Look at him," said one demon to my right, "He's scared."

Another laughed and quickly replied, "He should be."

Suddenly laughter rang throughout the enclosed space, and I tried to remember how I had come to such a horrific place. Maybe I did some things I shouldn't have, and maybe I didn't do some things I should have…but that didn't make me a bad person. What did I do to deserve this?

Okay, so maybe I went to school and drove my teachers up the wall. Maybe I did try to get every kind of work possible at home and in school. Maybe I was a jerk to my sisters and peers, but do I really deserve such torment? Such hell? How does this, in any way, make things right? It doesn't make my teachers sane again, and it certainly doesn't take back the awful acts I've committed or the terrible words I said.

I suppose it did bring them some satisfaction. They knew where I'm at now. How could they not? The Four-Eyed Beast wanted a reckoning, and I'm sure her dominions carried her mission and desires far and wide. That's why the rumbling is so loud. They're all here. They have come to witness my downfall, but isn't it too late to learn humility?

As the rumblings grew louder and louder with each passing moment I noticed the Beast becoming more agitated than before. I wished I could run away, but I knew the results would be ten times worse than this if I did.

I looked into the masses around me, trying to find a friendly or understanding voice. Most didn't notice my desperate search. The beast did, and when my eyes met hers, she released a loud snake-like hiss.

Her followers immediately grew silent, and I felt even more sweat roll from my brow. Oh, why did I skip her lecture? Why did I think she would let me get away with avoiding her horrid tests?

"Well," she said, in a remarkably comforting voice. "Are you going to make-up your missed assignment or take a zero?"

I squeezed my eyes shut and, when I finally reopened them, I stuttered out, "My book report is on Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*…"

Altar
Metalwork
Anita Brunner

Wood You Water Me?

High Fired Ceramic Sculpture

Greg Ferrell

Breaching the Gaps

Victoria Miller

The bracken was waist high, swallowing up the forest floor as it twisted itself around the bases of the tightly bunched trees. The beastly weed was everywhere, engulfing anything in its path that dared to grow from the solid ground. Eyker had been walking for days, and not once did the bracken loosen its hold on the forest. Not even when a break in the trees revealed a small, wooden cottage resting alone in the middle of a clearing.

The wooden walls of the minute structure had various small holes and gaps in several places, and the corners of the cottage had been fortified with large, gray stones which were crumbling and covered in a soft greenish moss at the bottoms. The worn and dirty deerskins in the windows were drawn up halfway, and a wooden slab of a door hung slightly ajar both invitingly and mockingly at the same time. From the archway of trees in which Eyker still stood, the partially open door revealed utter blackness like pitch but held the seductive lure of rest.

Eyker slowly drew his longsword from the scabbard at his side. Slivers of sunlight, that had raped its way through the trees, glinted off the cool steel. The golden hilt was chilled but weighed heavily in his palm. It comforted him as though it were an extension of himself, having wielded the weapon from an early age. Cautiously, Eyker stepped out into the small clearing. The bracken brushed against his leather-embraced calves as he walked into the opening. A thrush sang sweetly nearby, but nothing else stirred except for the soft breeze that rustled through the leaves at random intervals.

Eyker called out a greeting to bring out anyone who may live in the cottage, but was welcomed only by silence. There was a faint damp, putrid smell around the outside of the cottage; the wood had been taken over by fungus, which left it green and black in various places near the bottom of its foundation. Keeping his sword in hand, he pushed the rotting door open further with his other. The light spilled inside to illuminate the single room inside that was small but remarkably tidy.

He ducked his head in order to pass through the threshold, but the ceiling was just high enough to let Eyker stand up straight without brushing the top of his helmet along the wood. There was a small bed with a creaseless green blanket, a table with two short, bulky chairs, and a few wooden chests. A pewter water basin sat upon the chest beside the bed. A day's worth of dust clung to the top of the chest, and there were a few small yellow flowers floating innocently on the surface of the water within the basin.

Eyker removed his helmet from his head and ran his hands through the long, golden hair, now matted to his head with sweat. The cool air coming in through the windows caressed his scalp, soothing the discomfort that wearing the helmet brought through its protective confinement. He placed the intricate iron helmet with gold inlays beside the basin, causing the pewter to look dull against the silvery, brushed iron. The flowers appeared vivid with placidity beside the object that had saved him from various head wounds that would have made the Valkyries descend upon him in delight.

His mind lingered on the Valkyries while he sheathed his sword. They were the captivatingly beautiful maidens who came to collect the fiercest of warriors who had

died in battle. Some say that they appear before a warrior is meant to die, an omen that the three Norns had concluded their time was up. Eyker had yet to find a woman he would face death for, let alone Freya's Valkyries. When the need took him, any wench was good enough for that night; not even the Valkyries excited him anymore.

Eyker unfastened the brownish-gray wolf furs he wore for warmth, along with the green wool cloak he wore beneath it, setting both across the foot of the bed. Turning back to the chest, he lifted the pewter basin to his lips and let the shockingly cool water sooth his dry throat. His hands shook when he replaced the basin on the hard wood, spilling water over the rim, which left small puddles on the dark oaken surface.

There was a gasp from behind him, followed by a crash as though the cottage behind him had just crumbled upon itself in freight. Eyker turned to face the woman staring back at him with a startled expression. Her curly red hair was plaited with strands attempting to escape their binds, and she wore a simple gray, wool gown that covered everything from her neck to feet. Her face was pale, though how much was natural and how much came from her apparent fear of him was undetermined at the moment. Two bright green eyes locked with his in stubborn contempt.

Keeping eye contact, she knelt down and grasped one of the small logs she had previously dropped at her feet. She wielded it in front of her with both hands like a sword, daring Eyker to move. When he took a step forward, she swung it at him, shouting "*Sheas*! *A dhiobhil*!" The log resounded against his shoulder with a thud.

"*Gu leoir*!" Eyker shouted back at her in her own Gaelic, ripping the log out of her grasp and dropping it carelessly behind him. "I'm not here to hurt you!" He rubbed his arm, his lips curling into a frown.

The woman opened her mouth before closing it again. After a few more seconds, she spoke in a strenuous calmness that came through in a hesitant, "Who are ye?" Her voice was slightly husky with steady burr.

"'Who are ye?' She says." Eyker muttered under his breath, kicking the log farther behind him and completely out of her grasp. He eyed its companions scattered across the wooden floor with an inward groan.

"Mock me all ye like, I do no' have anything better ta do." She crossed her arms and glared ferociously at him.

He crossed his own arms and glared back, but his patience faltered with every moment that passed by, "My name is Eyker Olafson. My father is Olaf the Feared, Jarl of Tygard. And you, *elskling*? What do I call you?"

She frowned at him, blinking as though he were an apparition. Eyker was rewarded with the satisfaction that she could not understand what he had called her in Norse. If she knew it was a term of endearment, he'd wager she'd fly into a rage. He never thanked his father for taking the time to teach him more than one language growing up, and now he wished he had.

"Marsali," she said, taking in his height. He was taller than most of the men in the village. His hair was kissed by the sun, and even now in the shade of the cottage it shone like spun gold hanging in waves to just past his shoulders. He had a short beard of the same color and the bluest eyes that Marsali had ever seen. He stood regally in a parchment colored wool tunic and trews made out of the brown leather hides of some animal. His tunic didn't cover his arms, displaying two golden arm bands with sharp,

angular symbols carved into them. She thought they were runic inscriptions, perhaps blessings to their pagan gods.

"Ye speak Gaelic; I didna ken the Northmen could speak anything beyond Norse."

Eyker flashed her a smile, "Do not confuse common prattle with truth. Some Norsemen have been well taught in many languages. How else do you think we extend our power over so many countries?"

Marsali's eyes dropped to the sword strapped nonchalantly to his side, and she focused on it for the first time, taking in the sparkling gold hilt and the tiny arrow or spear shaped carving in the base of it, much like the ones that adorned his arm bands.

He looked down at it and chuckled, "That is one way, aye. I do not come to rape and pillage, so you can stop eyeing me like I will attack you at any moment."

Marsali laughed, though it lacked the presence of humor, "Ye expect me to trust a Northman? A Northman that, mind ye, has broken intae my home and willna state his business?"

Eyker scratched his bearded chin. "Have you ever been to Norway, Marsali?"

"Nay. I've lived with . . . here all my life." She looked at the floor then, the first time she had truly removed her gaze from him since she had entered the cottage. Taking it as a sign of reluctant acceptance of his presence in the cottage, Eyker moved toward her.

Marsali remained completely still as Eyker circled her in a long, confident stride. He reminded her of a hawk acknowledging its prey before diving in for the kill. She wanted to see if he would attack her, and if he did, she would be ready for him. He came to a halt behind her. Marsali's right hand fisted around the small dagger that her father had given to her when she reached the age of ten. It would be a shame to cut the throat of such a handsome man. He looked sculpted out of bronze, a statue come to life. Were she to reach out and touch him, she wondered if he would be cool like a statue or warm like any other man. Marsali felt the sliver hilt of her dagger biting into her palm.

"If ye are not going to raid us, then why are ye here?"

His breath was warm on her neck, causing her to flinch. "We came for land," he whispered in her ear before turning away from her and sitting down in one of the chairs, wearing a secretive smirk. "The air is cold here like back home, but we cannot sail to salvage food during the winter, so we were sent to find a better piece of land."

"Kenneth is trying to drive the Northmen out of the lands they have claimed as their own. The Shetlands…"

"The Shetlands are no concern of mine, nor is Kenneth." Eyker waved it aside. "Where is your husband?"

Ifrinn! Marsali had hoped he would not notice she was alone, "I have nay husband."

Eyker crossed his arms again. "Aye? Well, then where is your father, brother, or uncle? Who is protecting you?"

Marsali sighed, "I left my father at home." She peeked at him from under her lashes to find him expressionless. "He wished me to marry, so I left."

"And you traveled alone?" He threw his head back and laughed.

"Get out of here, *A dhiobhil!*" She picked up the nearest log and slung it across the cabin at him.

Eyker scrambled out of the chair quickly enough to avoid being hit, "I am not leaving until my warriors arrive, and when they do we will leave together so that you can

do whatever it is you are doing alone in the forest." Eyker was amused when Marsali stood on tiptoe to try to see out the window closest to her as though expecting an army of Norsemen to be standing right outside. The light was fading and the sulking shadows were moving slowly towards the center of the cottage.

"Why are they no' with ye now?" Marsali asked in a calmed tone.

Eyker's gaze dropped down to the table before him. Marsali started to wonder whether or not he would answer her when his deep voice broke through the chilled silence, "They wished to visit the church."

Marsali simply stared at him a moment before she could speak again. "Have they converted then? They have become Christians?"

"Mayhap. I wished to be alone for a while and so I left before them, without armor. Except for that." Eyker pointed at his helmet, staring back with dark eye holes looming like a skull. "I figured I would give Odin his chance to prove to me his existence, to send an army of Scots to challenge me alone, with nothing but my sword." Eyker drew his sword and laid it across the table. It was at least three feet long before meeting with the gold hilt, which formed a kind of replica cross, but Marsali did not say so outloud. He traced the spear shaped carving absently. "None came. I was denied my passage to Valhalla. Odin has grown weary of us, no longer caring if we convert or not into a religion that would have us bowing down to one God." Eyker looked up at Marsali before continuing. "Our gods would never have us bow down like a thrall."

Marsali fiddled with a crease in her dress, looking away from the intensity of Eyker's stare, "Your god, Odin, he's forsaken ye, and ye still do not wish to convert?" Eyker's laugh nearly made Marsali jump out of her skin.

"My father was a known across battlefields as Odin the Feared. He tore through enemy warriors as though they were nothing. They called him a Berserker." Eyker looked back to his sword, and at the symbol upon it, "He would fight without armor, sometimes without clothing if he felt doing so would strike fear into the hearts of his enemies. He has many scars, but lived through every battle not feeling the wounds he may have received. He told me that our family was in the blessings of the War God, Tyr; this is his symbol." He traced the carving on the sword again.

"Those blessed by Tyr would be victorious in battle. My father always believed our family would be welcomed into Valhalla, Odin's Great Hall that houses every fallen warrior who died fighting bravely and were to fight alongside Odin in the final battle of Ragnarok. And then one day my father grew far too old to wield a sword."

"Did he…" Marsali bit her lip.

"Die? Not before I left, though mayhap he has by now." Eyker noticed Marsali open her mouth to speak and continued before she could get in a word. "He sent me here. Like so many others, he had been thinking about converting for some time now. He wanted me to leave so I would not see his weakness."

"Is it weakness to convert to Christianity?" Marsali asked in a bitter tone.

"It is if you wait until you know you are going to die and only do so because you are afraid your own gods have forgotten you." Eyker had risen to his feet without realizing he had done so. He calmly sat back down. "Now I am to be Jarl and lead my men to do what is right, whatever it may be."

Marsali's brow furrowed, and she crossed her arms in front of her. She hadn't

moved from that one spot since she had come upon Eyker in her cottage, and now she sat down in the chair across from him. "Will you convert?" She wanted to persuade him to do so, but didn't want to pressure him into doing anything he didn't believe in, like her father had tried do by attempting to convince her that the man he had promised her to would make a good husband.

Eyker sighed and ran a hand through his hair. Time passed before he finally answered, "They say your God is forgiving and not as violent. They call us heathens while we worship the Norse gods but do not fear us any less once we have converted. If your God is so forgiving, why can't his people be as well?" He looked up, eyes pleading.

"We have raided, pillaged, some have raped and killed mercilessly in the names of all of our gods, but have Catholics never used force to extend their rule?"

He reached out over his abandoned sword and gripped her hand which had been resting on the table in one of his. He was warm, shockingly warm, despite the chilled tone of his voice. "If Odin left Asgard and arrived at the gates to Heaven," he continued. "Would God accept him and forgive him for his Blasphemy, or would Odin attempt to slay him since he is barbaric? Is Satan just a new manifestation of Loki, always the trickster, playing a jest upon the world?"

His thumb was stroking the palm of her hand in a gentle caress, disrupting her focus to where she only heard every other word of what he was saying. Marsali tried to pull away but his grip was firm. She looked up from their hands to face him.

"So tell me, Marsali, why change my beliefs if there is nothing to prove that what I am doing is really for the best? If Odin and the other gods can be doubted after our people have lived for them for so long. How can another God be trusted if ours are to be proven false?"

The pain in his eyes moved her, but Marsali didn't know what to say. He loosened his grip on her hand, and she yanked it back, feeling foolish for doing so. Her hand felt as though it had been branded, but her awareness of it was meaningless. His pain moved her, and she couldn't stop herself from stepping away from the table and resting her shaky hand upon his shoulder and watching as he closed his eyes as he exhaled the breath that he had held since his admission. Marsali left him mometarily to gather up some cheese and a loaf of crusty bread out of the chest near the hearth and place them in front of Eyker. "Ye can stay here until yer warriors arrive. God would wish it."

A fortnight passed, and still no warriors arrived. With everyday that passed, Eyker felt Marsali's guard slip more and more. She even quit clutching the dagger she thought he was unaware of, and apologized for having him make his pallet beneath a large tree just outside the cottage using his wolf furs and a blanket Marsali had been kind enough to lend him. When Marsali coyly suggested he move his pallet into the cabin by the door, Eyker refused. It was already too tempting being around her to risk ruining her trust in him by letting himself lay that close to her at night. He had controlled his lust for the past fortnight due to the distance he put between them during the night.

Soft light from daybreak spilled through the trees above him, reminding him that he had many responsibilities he had. He had slept very little the past few nights, disturbed by dreams of acts he had sworn he would not pursue. The dried crunch of footsteps over autumn leaves diverted his attention from the troublesome thoughts the woman inside the cottage had aroused. There was a shuffling rhythm of one foot

followed by another in a slow, precise manner. Whoever it was wanted to be heard.

Eyker leaned over and reached for his sword, which was always close at hand for situations as this, when a cold, sharp poke at his back brought him to a halt.

"The Great Eyker, Jarl and fierce warrior with eyes forged from the great fjords of Norway. Sleeping in the dirt when a cottage lies there? You've lost your helmet, I see."

"Are you a bard now, Gunnar? I have slept on the ground before, sheath your sword. A woman sleeps in the cottage, and I left my helmet there as well. I didn't feel it served much purpose."

"I should have been a bard," Gunnar returned his sword to its leather scabbard and stepped back to allow Eyker room to stand.

"Aye? Why are you not?"

"Singing is not my strong point; besides, I much prefer to run our enemies through than spin tales about it."

Eyker couldn't help but smile. Gunnar stood there before him, standing only slightly shorter than Eyker himself, wearing his chain mail armor that had dulled with wear over a green tunic that clung to his wide, muscled figure, and matching trews. His iron helmet had a dragon welded onto the front of it, whose head formed the plate that covered the bridge of his nose and hiding the nearly-black, straight hair which hung to his shoulders. He had dark brown eyes, the color of his sword belt, and his beard had been braided at the sides, framing his mouth and giving him the appearance of a walrus.

"Did you say a woman?" Gunnar arched a brow.

"Aye."

"Comely?"

"You will not touch her."

Gunnar waved the thought aside, "Do you claim her then?"

"Mayhap. Where are the others?"

Gunnar cocked his head to the side and regarded him silently before answering. "We made camp not far from here. I was hunting." He indicated the wooden bow hanging over his shoulder. "Come with me."

Eyker nodded in consent, and they slunk through the overgrowth of bracken and bushes like two foxes. Some while later, Eyker had gone to remove the arrow from the doe he had struck down, leaving Gunnar to watch for the hare they had seen hop along moments earlier.

Hunching over, Eyker retrieved the broken end of the arrow out of the limp deer carcass. The already reddish brown fur now had mats of a darker crimson smeared within it; the artistry of Eyker's predatory victory.

A soft thump of lifeless weight hitting the ground somewhere behind him caused him to glance up. Gunnar had dropped a large hare at the base of a distorted tree trunk that was bulbous at the base and went upwards in a twisted cacophony of limbs and dying leaves. The sun came through in slivers of vivid warmth that overcame the chilly wind that would occasionally rip through the woods, allowing Eyker to view the brilliant red upon his companion's hands, even from some distance away.

Gunnar looked up to see Eyker staring at his hands "Do you recall the eve of our first battle? You stared at the caked blood on your hands for so long that Old Olaf had to carry you off to the steam bath and bathe you himself."

Eyker tore his gaze away from tiny red smear on his own hand, left from removing the deer's skewer, and wiped his hand on an unsoiled patch of its fur, "That was a long time ago."

"Aye, it was. So what troubles you? The woman in the cottage? Afraid she might run off with a handsome Norseman, other than yourself?"

"Mayhap you credit your ability with the women far more than you should? Did the others convert like they wanted to?"

"Women love me. As for the others, they will not convert unless you give them your blessing. You are our Jarl now, and we will follow your orders no matter what they may be."

"They cannot wish me to carry the burden of our beliefs for them?" Eyker gasped, looking up from the deer carcass.

"Aye, we can," Gunnar said. "A Jarl is never wrong." He snatched up the fat, gray hare. Curling his lip, he dropped it again before expelling a disgusted "Ughhhh."

Eyker raised a brow at his friend's antics before he noticed the brownish glob that had smeared across Gunnar's hand and was also on the matted fur of the hare. "While I pride myself to believe so, my father is still Jarl." He struggled not to laugh.

Gunnar glared at Eyker. "Aye, but he was one foot into his own funeral pyre when our longship took to the sea. If he had wished for you to see him die as an old man rather than as a warrior, we would all be there watching the flames drift out to sea. Laugh all you like, mayhap your friend there left you a gift as well. The black-hearted fiend." Gunnar pointed at the lifeless deer before wiping his hand across the twisted, fat tree behind him. "Let Bjorn have the hare. For the sakes of us all, don't eat this." He kicked the rabbit a few feet ahead of him, where after a few lumpy flops it halted with black eyes gazing straight up at nothing.

"Quit playing with your food. Just because Aud preferred Bjorn over you does not mean he should be given the hare."

"I'll tell him to clean it first!" Picking the hare up by its back feet and holding it out away from him, Gunnar sped up his pace to catch up with Eyker. "Aud would have chosen me," he began as he matched Eyker's stride. "Only there was that one night when I drank so much mead that I spent the night in the stable. Imagine my surprise when I woke to find Bjorn's sister covering me like a warm bear fur. What did Bjorn need with a horse in the middle of the day anyhow?"

"I can only wonder. Considering that she died of some flux not too long after that, you had Loki on your side." Eyker said.

"Ah, well, Loki always did favor me, didn't he? What of this woman you have locked away in your crumbly little cottage? Is she so fair that you do not wish her to be seen by another man in fear that she may prefer him over you? Bjorn could be a problem, that whoreson." He said the last bit to himself. "Could it be that a wench has finally captured your eyes after all this time or maybe she's captured other parts."

Eyker glowered at him. "Jest some more little brother, for your crimes are adding up against you."

As they came to the clearing and the cottage once more, Eyker said, "Wait here." He dropped the deer and made his way in the direction of the cottage.

Marsali paced around the cottage. She had been doing so all morning since she

woke from a troubled sleep, periodically pausing to tidy something up in an attempt to clear her mind. And then she saw the helmet staring ominously at her. He left it there just to taunt her, the wee devil. She snorted when she realized she just described him as small when the man was a giant.

Since her mother's death, her father pushed her to marry. Marsali thought that if she was to marry, she should have some say into who it would be. As payment to a debt her father owed was not her grounds of marriage, and her father had enough wealth to pay them off without sacrificing her happiness to do so. It would be to a man who was braw and passionate about his beliefs. Eyker came to mind immediately and she dismissed it with a laugh. She picked up his helmet and studied the detailed craftsmanship of it with even more runic inscriptions. It looked no different from any other knight's armor other than the runes, but he was still one of the Northmen, making him forbidden to her.

The door crashed open, slamming loudly against the wall. Eyker regarded it for a moment with a frown before turning his attention to her and then stalked in with a determined stride. His chiseled jaw, noticeable even with the beard, was set stubbornly in a fashion that let her know he had come to ask something of her and was determined to get it.

"Sorry for startling you." He said, motioning nonchalantly at the door still ajar.

"Well ye should be, barging in like a savage beastie and all," Marsali said. His pale blue eyes were darker than usual, like a stormy sky.

"My warriors arrived through the night."

Marsali's heart lurched. She looked away from him. "Oh. I see. I guess ye will be needing this back then?" She held the helmet out to him without meeting his eyes.

His fingers brushed hers as he took the helmet. Marsali felt her bottom lip tremble slightly. She bit down on it, hoping Eyker hadn't noticed.

His free hand cupped her check. His thumb caressed her lip. "Do not be sad."

"What are y-mmmfh!" His mouth closed on hers and captured her words before she could get them out.

The helmet hit the floor with a clatter, and he fisted his hand in her hair behind her head. His other hand moved from her face, slid down her arm, and pulled her close, splayed against the small of her back. She tasted like she'd been eating warm, sweet berries, and his head swam with it. She pushed at his shoulders and he leaned back, breathing heavily.

"What is wrong with ye?" Marsali gasped out the words, wondering how she had managed to become wedged between the wall and Eyker when she didn't remember moving at all. Her lips tingled, feeling numb and fuller than they had ever felt before.

"I'm sorry; I should not have done that."

Eyker turned, scooped up his fallen helmet, and left without a second glance.

Gunnar sat on a fallen tree at the edge of the clearing, away from the front of the cabin, which was almost invisible due to the wild growth of the swamp of green bracken that surrounded it. With the dead deer and hare at his feet, he had taken his helmet off, and was in the process of braiding a lock of hair at his temple, when Eyker reemerged from the cottage expressionless and walking toward the woods as though he didn't see anything that stood in front of him. Before Eyker had gotten very far,

movement from behind him caught Gunnar's eye; a fiery haired woman was racing after him from the cottage, and she was scowling.

Scowling? Gunnar had never seen a woman scowl at Eyker before. But this one reached out and grabbed Eyker's arm and tugged at it to bring him to a halt. Thor's hammer, the wench was yelling at him. What did he do to her? Deny her his bed? Gunnar rubbed his eyes and looked again. She was still carrying on about something, but he could only hear random words. Gunnar lowered himself into the bracken, carefully avoiding the soiled hare, and inched forward on his elbows and stomach towards Eyker and the woman who was evidently doing nothing more than amusing Eyker. He had taken on the stance and half grin he took when the bards back home began spinning fantastical tales about him in battle that Eyker hated to hear.

"What in God's name was that about?"

"Missing me already?" Eyker asked, smirking to himself.

"Wh-what is..Ye canna go around assuming anything ye like about people!" Marsali shrieked.

"Aye, I can. I'm Jarl." Eyker said as though they were having a normal conversation.

"This is Scotland." She hissed through clenched teeth.

"Mayhap."

"Mayhap? Mayhap! Ye canna barge into a country and act like ye are king!"

"I do not want to rule the country."

"Oh, nay, ye want to rule over me!" Marsali wanted to shake sense into him.

Eyker spun around and reached out for her, but Marsali pulled away from him. "What gives you that idea? Have I ever demanded anything of you?"

"Nay, but ye are treating me as though I am one of yer subjects that ye are too good to be found with in their private quarters. Ye just kissed me, Eyker. Kissed me! And then ye just prance off to your warriors and leave me behind as ye said ye would."

"Come with me."

"Oh, nay, so ye can rule over me?"

"I want to make you mine is all! You will be my wife, not my thrall."

"Mayhap there is no difference. My father is one of Kenneth's thanes, he would find out eventually and come after us. He'd kill ye without thinking twice about it and proclaim me to be a whore and leave me to who ever would have me."

"If your father is smart, he would see the advantage to having a score of Norse warriors as allies." Eyker scratched his chin as he answered. He grew weary of the dispute.

"Ye kent about my father the whole time, didn't ye? I bet you planned to gain land as a bride price, too. Ye only stayed around on his orders."

"You only just told me about him! Are you daft? I do not care what your father has. I only want you. You!" He reached a hand out to her and she backed up a step.

"Ye are not a Christian. I canna marry ye even if I did want to because of that." She turned away from him.

"And if I converted?"

Marsali whirled back around to face him, gawking at him. "I would never be able to live with myself if ye converted just to get into my bed!"

"If I only wanted to share your bed, I would have taken you on the first night I met

you. Do not dare feign surprise with me; I have wanted you since a full fortnight ago!"

"But ye can't convert over something as unimportant as a woman…"

Eyker threw his helmet down carelessly in exasperation and cupped her face in his palms, holding her gaze. "Not for any woman, for *a* woman. Don't you see? My gods have forsaken me, but your God gave me you. You should have sent me on my way, yet you trusted me to stay with you even though you had no way to defend yourself if I was a real threat to you." His gaze dropped to her delicate, pink lips. "Mayhap I am a threat to you…" He thought he just might kiss her once more when the sound of a throat clearing nearby caught his attention. Marsali heard it too, for she jerked away from him and pulled her dagger from its hidden pocket in her dress.

Gunnar spoke near his feet. "Tell the besom to put the dagger away, Eyker."

"Gunnar, what are you doing hiding in the weeds?" Eyker asked.

"I did not wish to disrupt you…"

"Yet you did" Eyker said through his teeth.

"I admire your desire to make merry in the middle of the bracken, and I mayhap would not have watched, but we have get back…."

Eyker sighed, and motioned for Gunnar to collect the deer. Once he was sure his friend could no longer hear him, he turned back to Marsali who was still clutching her dagger and gawking after Gunnar in disbelief.

"Will you?"

"Did he just say *mayhap* he wouldna watch?"

Eyker chuckled. "Aye, that he did." He took her hand in his to draw her attention back to him. "Will you come with me?"

"And be your wife?"

Eyker nodded, his throat felt like he had swallowed a ball of wool.

Marsali smiled and nodded. "Aye. I supposed I will, but didna be shocked when ye find yourself facing an angry, braw Scot named MacRae sometime soon."

"Don't fash yourself about that now. Go get your cloak and let us go and I will introduce you to my warriors."

Gunnar joined him with the deer over his shoulder, still carrying the hare away from his body. "She's fiery." Gunnar said, eyeing her backside as she entered the cottage.

"Touch her and not even our friendship will save you."

"I do not desire to steal your woman, Eyker."

"Do you think the others will approve?"

"Of her?" Gunnar pointed towards the cottage. "Are you daft? She's got the fury of a Norsewoman within her. You could not have found a better match."

"Nay, not Marsali. I am converting."

"I heard…" He looked thoughtful, gazing at the ground. "I will not."

"Nay?"

"Nay. The others mayhap will, but I kent you since before we had beards. You would blame yourself if the way of our ancestors was lost. I will stay the heathen, if you give me your word not to let the Christians stone me to death."

Eyker smiled but did not look at his friend. "Aye. You have my word."

Gunnar glanced up finally to see that Marsali had rejoined them, stopping firmly at Eyker's side.

Mother Nature's Garden

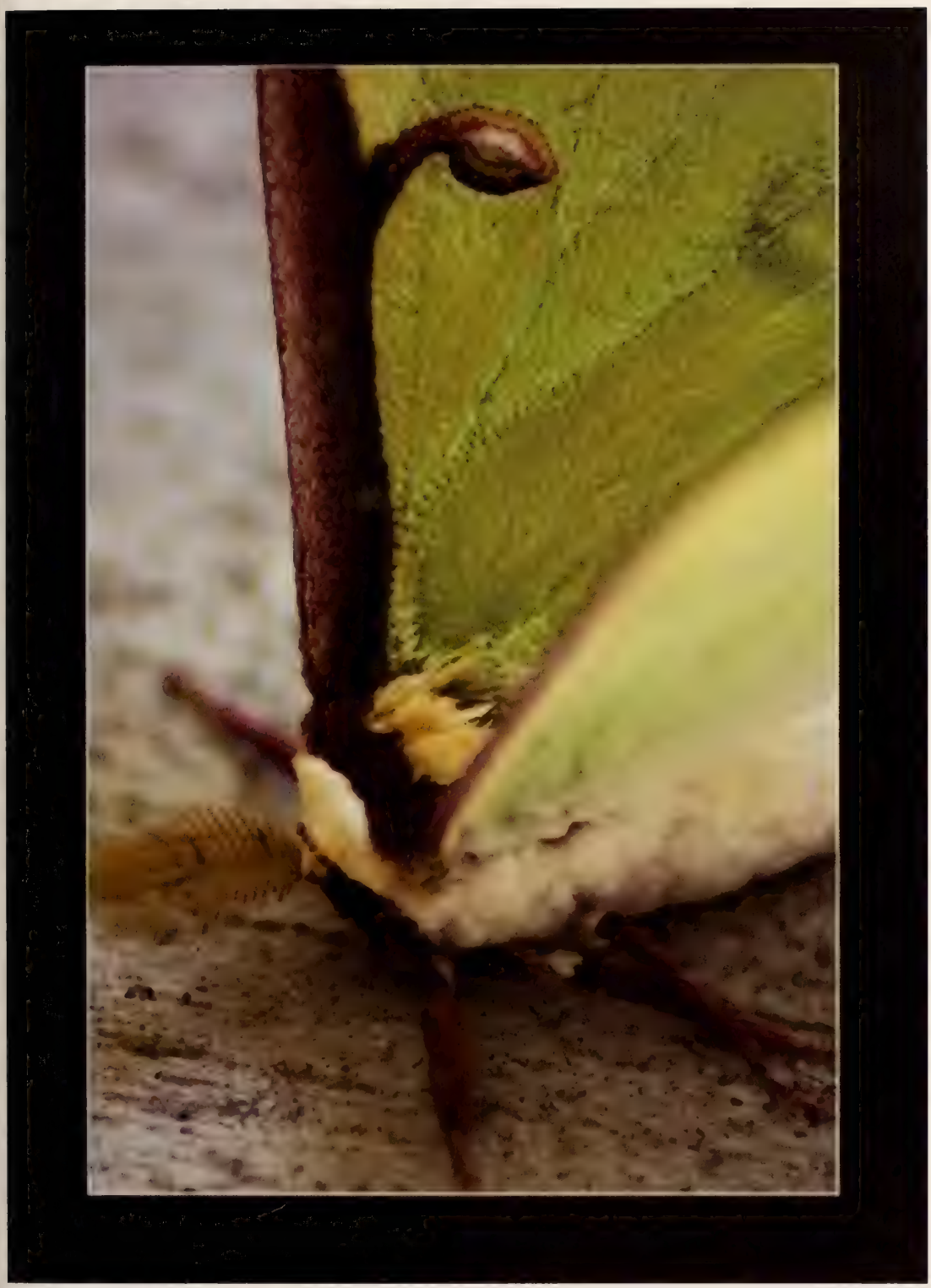
Elena Fodera

Fruit grew from the Wisdom Tree,
ripe and juicy, starlight grown
from perfect glossy shining seeds,
oh-so-gently sown.
Reaching upwards, mighty, strong,
greater than all trees yet known,
growing tall
by the Garden wall
made of ancient stone.

Mother Nature's garden,
where the Thoughtfulness Fountain flows,
Her place of peace, Her place of rest,
where no one but She ever goes.
She sleeps and breathes, She works and creates,
with never-calloused hands of rose
which move with such grace
as the lips on Her face,
a more radiant smile than any man knows.

I saw her silver turquoise eyes
set above a cheek so fair,
and the chirping crickets ceased their song
whenever her voice floated on the air.
She sang in tune with only the Wind,
as the Garden's other sounds did not dare;
He never stopped blowing
through her long and flowing
windy weeping willow hair.

And I saw never-aging Mother Earth;
who sees all joy and sees all pain:
Winter Spring Summer Fall,
from month to month, from wax to wane.
She watches her garden, morning noon night,
and watches as the clouds bring rain.
She thrives forever in her prime,
ageless and transcending time,
from day to day, not one the same.



Lunar Moth

Color Photograph

Luciana Carneiro

Resistance

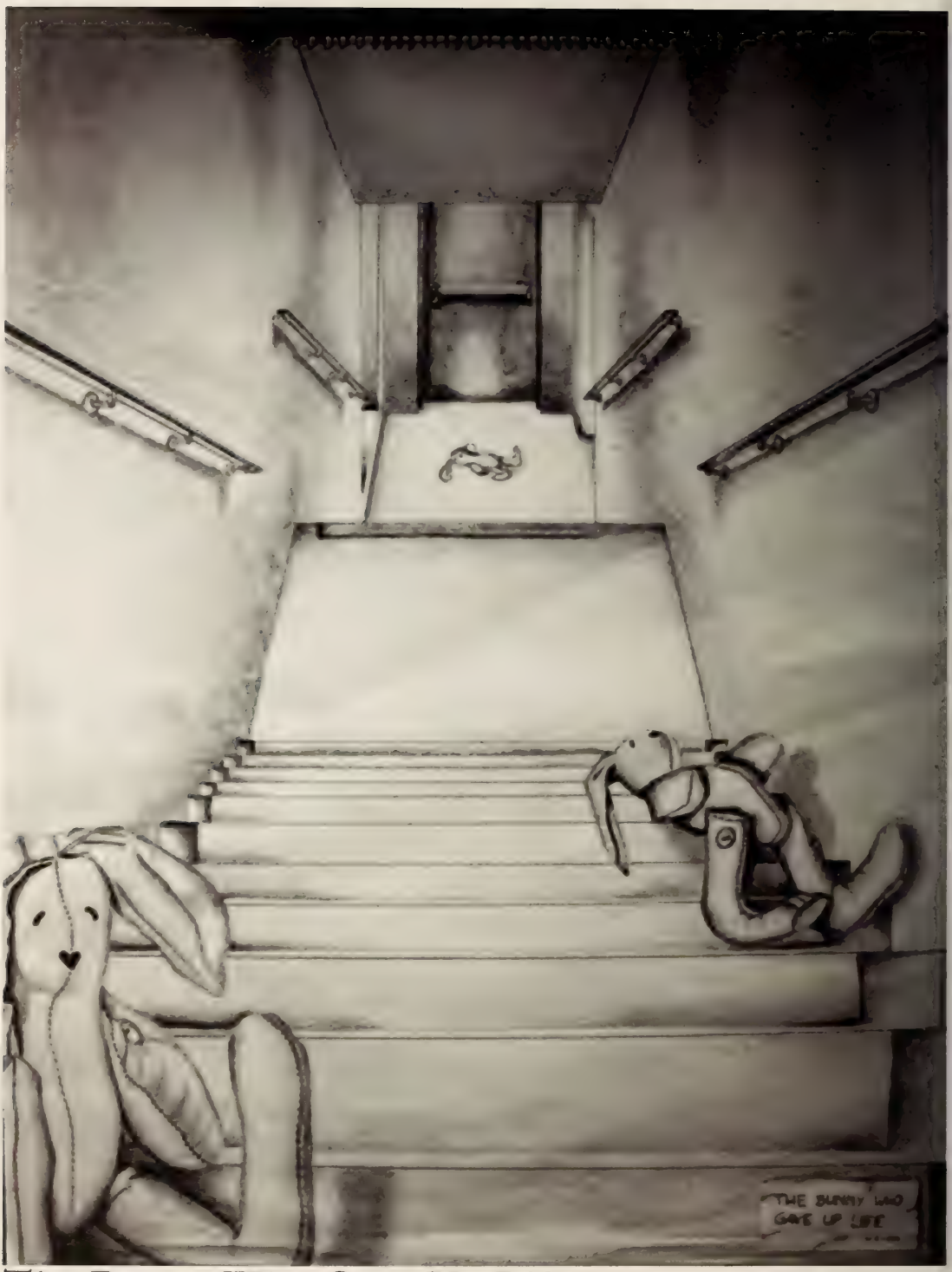
Virginia Gribben

Claire has a laundry list of odd tendencies; some may even dare to say that she is a little obsessive-compulsive. For example, if she gets hit on one arm she hits the other to even it out. She's been known to do strange things like zip and unzip her purse in successions of three. She is almost physically incapable of eating any food that has touched another food on her plate. For the most part, she tries to keep these quirks to herself but there is one thing that she cannot stand; it drives her to distraction when a person's tag sticks out of their clothes. If she sees this she has the urgent need to fix it. Once Claire sees a tag, the tag is all that she can focus on, the lights dim, her palms sweat and she has the urge to bend her arms where there are no joints. Until Claire sees that the tag is fixed, there is no other reality, just Claire and the "Made in China." Her tag tucking has gotten her written up at work; her co-worker thought he was being sexually harassed. Claire has also been accused of being a pickpocket. In short, her tag obsession has gotten her into plenty of trouble.

Sunday morning, Claire sits in church and she cannot concentrate on what Father Hess is saying. The only thing Claire can see is a white rectangle taunting her from the waistband of a black Chanel pantsuit. There is no priest, no blood of Christ, no effigy of Jesus, dying for her sins. "Size four, dry clean only, size four, dry clean only" is being chanted instead of "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." Claire knows that it's only a matter of time before she reaches forward and really pisses off Mrs. Wicker by tucking her tag. The woman has made it clear that Claire must keep her hands off of her person, or else. Claire is not sure what "else" is, but she doesn't want to find out. Mrs. Wicker has given her plenty of warnings, and she is feisty.

With her hands shaking, tucked in her pockets, Claire focuses on Jesus' face; his forlorn expression seems only to be for her. Claire keeps staring, letting her guilt wash over her. She starts a new chant in her head, "Jesus will be mad, Jesus will be mad, Jesus will be mad." She knows that if she can keep this up for a few more minute, Mrs. Wicker will rise for communion and take her taunting tag with her. Suddenly the tag appears where Jesus was, and then it is gone, off to receive the body of Christ. Claire resumes normal breathing, grabs her purse to go to communion and ducks out of mass before it's over; her pride in resisting overpowers her guilt of leaving. Jesus will understand.

Meagon's Hill
Digital Painting with Photoshop
Greg Ferrell



The Bunny Who Gave Up Life

Charcoal Drawing

Anita Brunner

Baby Doll

Leah DiNatale

Kennedie felt the scorching, yellow rays of the florescent spotlight spilling out over the top of her head and radiating out into the audience. She felt as if she were being cooked slowly from the outside in. Her cerulean crowning dress felt stifling hot, like a large baking bag. She could feel small beads of perspiration forming under the puffy shoulder sleeves of the dress.

Under the sweltering lights, Kennedie could smell the spray tan Miss Barbara had given her yesterday afternoon. It smelled like an overpowering mixture of year old suntan lotion and sweat; Kennedie wanted to throw up all over the shiny, brown hard wood boards covering the broad stage.

I sure do wish those lights weren't so bright. Kennedie was careful not to let her big smile fade.

"Kennedie when you get up there on that stage you better not start fidgeting, you understand me? I paid a dollar for each of them Swarovksi crystals on that dress. That's a thousand dollars, Kennedie. Daddy only puts 10,000 dollars in the fund for a whole year. I better see my thousand dollars sparklin' when they put that crown on your head. Stand still. I'm tryin' to make sure this fall doesn't come out. If I don't pin it in tight enough your hair will fall out on the middle of the stage," Angie said in a muffled voice, holding a large, thick bobby pin between her teeth.

"KENNEDIE LYNN JILES DO NOT WALK AWAY FROM ME!" Kennedie winced as she felt the familiar pinch of pins being dug into her scalp.

"Kennedie, don't move away from me when I'm tryin' to fix your hair. I'm only gonna tell you one more time. You understand me? I swear it will fall out if I don't pin it tight enough. We won best hair in Little Miss Peach County with this fall. We want to win best hair again. Taylor Barfield always wins best hair, but we got her with this."

The thick, platinum wig stopped at Kennedie's waist and was well worth Angie's 500 dollars. There was no way Kennedie could ever hope to win the best hair award with her own limp hair, much less the title of Little Miss Alabama against Taylor Barfield. Even Angie herself had to admit Taylor's long, glossy black hair was beautiful.

"Ok, there Kennedie. It's in. Now all you got to do is walk to the center of the stage and make sure that you pose the way you've been practicin' with Miss Amy. You understand me, Baby Doll? " Angie held Kennedie tightly by her thin shoulders.

"Kennedie, you don't want that Taylor Barfield to beat you, do you? That snotty little girl and her momma think that they can just steal the title of Little Miss Alabama right out from under us," Angie said as she patted Kennedie's fake yellow curls and smoothed the skirt of her stiff crowning dress.

Angie took a loud gulp of Diet Coke from the can sitting next to her box of bobby pins on the counter in front of the large dressing room mirror. She wished the Diet Coke had a shot of Jim Beam mixed in. The two shots she took at 10:00 that morning were starting to wear off. Kennedie's pageants always made Angie so nervous. It was almost as if she were getting up on the stage herself. Angie never went to any of Kennedie's pageants without Jim Beam; pageants were way too stressful without her old

buddy. She usually snuck a bottle into Kennedie's duffle bag, but she hadn't had time this morning.

Crap. Today is going to be a long day. Angie took another long swig of her Diet Coke.

"Kennedie, I saw Taylor's momma staring at your new crowning dress during dress rehearsals yesterday, Kennedie. She's scared, Baby Doll, real scared. This dress is just gorgeous on you, and she knows it. Blue looks so much better on you than yellow looks on her. Taylor doesn't stand a chance against us, does she, baby?"

"No, Momma," Kennedie said quietly.

Why does Momma hate Taylor so much? Kennedie decided not to ask her momma the question out loud.

"That's my Baby Doll," Angie said with a smile as she popped a peanut M&M into Kennedie's mouth, as if she were an obedient poodle being rewarded for learning a new trick.

As she stood straight with her arms rigidly at her sides, palms facing out and down, left foot pointed forward, and right foot pointed out, Kennedie tried to remember everything her momma had said to her backstage in the dressing room and the way Miss Amy had taught her to stand. It made her head hurt to try to remember so many things at once.

I hate pageants so much. Daddy does, too. He always argues with Momma about how much money they cost. I wonder what would happen if I told him I didn't want to do them anymore. He would probably let me play softball.

The three layers of crinoline under the skirt of her full dress made her legs itch, and Kennedie had to fight the urge to scratch them. Posed so perfectly, she looked like the life sized version of a porcelain doll. It seemed like she had been plucked from a stand off of a little girl's top shelf where collectable items were kept. Onstage, Kennedie really did look just like a doll that was too expensive to touch or ever play with, so delicate she would break if you turned her the wrong way.

Kennedie's left eye started to itch too, but she knew better than to rub it or, even worse, squint. Both of her eyes felt heavy and tired from the thick, false eyelashes and runny black eyeliner that encircled her lids. She hoped the judges didn't notice the small pools of black goo that had begun to cake in the corner of her eyes. Over the years, Kennedie had mastered the art of paralyzing the muscles in her face so that her blue eyes stayed wide and her big, pink grin stayed painted on. It was a difficult task; her mouth felt sore most of the time from the brilliant white flippers that pinched her gums and covered her missing front tooth and permanently crooked left incisor. Consequently, this gave her the dead, emotionless stare of a doll with blank, glass eyes.

Kennedie was glad when the competition was over and it was crowning time. As she stood in line with the other girls, she knew it wouldn't be long before Mr. Burt walked on stage and announced the winner.

Thank goodness. Kennedie kept smiling.

If she looked out of the corner of her eye, she could see Mr. Burt standing just behind the thick, dark velvet curtain at the side of the stage. She sure was glad; soon, she could go home and take her prickly dress off.

Kennedie wanted to turn and see how Taylor looked, but she knew better than to take her eyes off the judges. She couldn't understand why her momma didn't like Taylor.

She was so pretty with her long, straight, dark hair and bright yellow dress. Before they went onstage, Taylor smiled and said, "I like your crowning dress. It sparkles a lot."

Kennedie wanted to tell Taylor that yellow was her favorite color, but instead she just nodded, afraid that her momma could somehow see her talking to Taylor. As Kennedie stood posed onstage, loud music began to play, signaling Burt Edwards entrance onto the stage to begin the crowning ceremony.

Mr. Burt, the pageant director, dressed in a black tuxedo and shiny black dress shoes, flitted onto the stage in his showy, dramatic way. He walked to the podium and began to speak into the microphone. "Here at the Little Miss Alabama pageant we want to thank everyone for coming out and having fun with us! All of these little girls are just absolutely gorgeous!" Burt said in his loud, sing song voice.

It was always hard for Kennedie to figure out what exactly Mr. Burt was so excited about; he was always so giggly, whether he was announcing or talking to her and the other girls backstage. Kennedie knew pageants sure didn't make her giggle.

"And now, without further ado, I will begin with the crowning ceremony. Our first award is the Early Bird Award. This award goes to the little girl who got her application turned in the quickest. Our Early Bird Winner is Lindsey Andrews!" Lindsey was standing next to Taylor, who was wearing a deep purple dress. She stiffly raised her arm so that the reigning Miss Alabama, Missy Daniels, would know where to set the small trophy.

I wish he would hurry up. In her anticipation, Kennedie almost forgot to smile.

"We will now give out our awards for prettiest hair, best smile, and best dress! The award for prettiest hair goes to Kennedie Jiles!" As she stifily raised her arm, Kennedie could feel every pin sticking in her scalp. She could hear her momma's loud hollers from the audience.

I wish Momma would be quiet. It's so embarrassing when she screams like that.

"The award for best smile is awarded to Taylor Barfield! Taylor Barfield is also the recipient of the best dress award!"

"And now, what we've all been waiting for, the crowning of the new Little Miss Alabama! All of these little girls are winners and we just love them so much! Our 3rd runner up is… Miss Laura Matthews! Let's have a big round of applause for Laura ladies and gentlemen," Burt said in a loud voice. "Our 2nd runner up is Alyssa Stevens. Congratulations Alyssa! And finally… Our 1st runner up is Kennedie Jiles. Our new Little Miss Alabama is Taylor Barfield! Congratulations Taylor!"

Kennedie smiled as Burt Edwards placed the silver, cubic zirconium studded crown on Taylor's head. For once, she was thankful that the crown was not being put on her own. "It's shiny and pretty," thought Kennedie, but she knew she had one just like it at home in the big cabinet in the living room. Besides, Taylor looked really excited when Mr. Burt had said she was the winner. Kennedie had decided that since the pageant was over it was o.k. to look beside her.

It's pretty, but it looks heavy, just like my other one. Kennedie was relieved that she did not have to carry the heavy crown on her own head. She could still remember the sharp pain of having bobby pins stuck into her scalp to hold the heavy crown in place so many times before. It made her tired to think about having to hold her neck stiff enough to keep the tiara straight on her head.

After her initial feeling of relief, Kennedie began to feel a sickening guilt rise into her throat. She felt like gagging.

What is momma gonna say? Kenndie began to panic. She knew her momma had spent a lot of money on this pageant.

I bet Momma and Daddy are gonna get in a big fight when we get home.

Kennedie wondered what she could have possibly done wrong in the pageant. She had performed her baton routine perfectly. Not missed a single twirl. She knew she had done her step turns perfect, exactly the way she had practiced them with Miss Amy. As she slowly walked off of the stage, Kennedie stared at her shiny, white, patent-leather Mary Janes. She knew her momma would be waiting as she walked off stage.

"Kennedie Lynn Jiles, I can't believe this! I just can't believe that we lost! It's ok though, Baby Doll. They stole the crown from us this time." Angie fumed in Kennedie's small face after ushering her into one of the only individual dressing rooms located backstage.

She locked the door, even though none of the girls were supposed to have personal dressing rooms. Angie didn't trust the other girls' mothers. She knew they might try to steal Angie's curling iron or, worse yet, the crowning dress before Kennedie had the chance to put it on after her talent routine. Angie began to hastily cram all of Kennedie's eye shadow, blush, pink lipstick, bobby pins, curling irons, and brushes into a large polka dotted duffel bag.

"Get that dress off right now. I paid 1500 dollars for that dress, and I don't want it messed up. I'm gonna have to hear about you losing from Daddy, too. Maybe the judges in the next pageant will have some sense." Kennedie tried to pull the heavy dress over the top of her head.

"NOOO, Kennedie!!!! I've got to take your fall off first and then let you step out of it! You are gonna get makeup all over it!! It costs a hundred dollars to dry clean this dress!"

Angie quickly picked Kennedie up and sat her on top of the counter. Kennedie felt like she was being scalped as Angie pulled the long wig off of the top of her head. Angie didn't bother to take the pins out one at a time.

"Taylor beat us. I just can't believe it. Now we get to see her and her wannabe high class momma strutting around at the Miss Cobb County pageant next month, actin' like they're better than everybody else." Angie said angrily, as she carefully hung the glittering crowning dress inside the plaid garment bag Kennedie had won in the pageant the month before.

Kennedie fought the urge to cry. She knew it would only make her momma get more upset. Crying made her mascara run and eyes burn. Kennedie hated it when her eyes burned; it was worse than when they itched.

"O.K. Kennedie, let's just see what the judges had to say. I am gonna go get those score sheets right now. You stay right back here in this dressing room. You understand me?"

Kennedie saw her momma push the heavy dressing room door open and walk out into the narrow hallway that led to the auditorium entrance. Kennedie watched her walk away with a small sigh of relief, thankful for a temporary reprieve. She scratched her head hard.

At least I have that itchy dress off. Kennedie was thankful to finally be able to scratch her knee in the baggy shorts and T-shirt. She always looked forward to putting on comfortable clothes after one of her pageants was over.

I sure am glad Momma wasn't mad at me. I'm glad I didn't drop my baton or forget to smile when I did my step turn. Sometimes Kennedie's momma got mad at her after she lost a pageant. It didn't happen much at all. Kennedie didn't lose much either; she had learned how to do everything perfect over the past eight years.

I don't know what Momma would do if I told her I didn't want to be in pageants anymore.

After she heard the familiar taps of her momma's black high heels on the tile floor outside the dressing room, Kennedie opened the door. Kennedie felt hot all of a sudden. The room didn't seem large enough for both of them. Kennedie knew her momma took up a lot of the room. "Let's see what the judges had to say, Baby Doll."

As Angie flipped through the judges' notes, she read all the usual remarks Kennedie always received:

"Beautiful!"

"What a gorgeous crowning dress!"

"What a poised little girl!"

It was only on the last sheet that there was any kind of criticism at all. Angie looked at the sheet, puzzled. Kennedie noticed the perplexed looked on her mother's face.

"Momma, what does it say?" Kennedie asked.

"Kennedie, Baby Doll, don't even worry about it. That's so ridiculous…." Angie said with a sniff.

Momma never tells me anything. She never really listens to me and she always tells me to be quiet whenever I ask her anything. Pageants always put her in such a bad mood. I wish Daddy would take me to softball games instead.

"Momma, I want to know what it says."

"Fine, Kennedie" Angie said with an exasperated sigh. Pageants always made Angie so exhausted. How could she have forgotten her bottle of Jim Beam on a day like today? It must have been all the stress.

It says, "Your eyes weren't smiling! Try to smile with your eyes!"

"Momma, how do I smile with my eyes?" Kennedie asked in a shaky voice as she gazed at herself in the large floor length mirror across from the counter she was sitting on top of.

Why isn't anything I do ever good enough?

"Baby, I don't know. That judge is crazy, probably just jealous that she doesn't have a little granddaughter as beautiful as you are. You know those judges are just mean ole' ladies tryin' to relive their glory days."

Gazing into the mirror, Kennedie saw that her cherry red lipstick had begun to bleed around the corners of her thin lips. She smiled wide at her own reflection and opened her blue eyes as wide as she could.

Maybe this is how I smile with my eyes. Maybe I can do it good enough if I try really hard. Kennedie silently looked at herself. She tried to look as happy as she could.

I don't look very happy at all. I look scared. No, not scared, I look…sad. Kennedie kept smiling anyway.

As she continued to look into the mirror, Kennedie saw she had lipstick on her teeth and that the black goo that had formed in the corners of her eyes had begun to run; the goo burned as it spilled out and puddled beneath her bottom eyelashes. Her thick foundation had begun to crease and her face looked splotchy and very pale in certain places. Her hair was matted and tangled from scratching her head so hard. Kennedie finally let the corners of her mouth fall, frowning for the first time.

"I look like a clown," Kennedie said out loud, by accident.

"What's that, Baby?" Angie muttered as she reached under the counter to gather a couple of large bobby pins that had fallen out of the box she had placed on the counter while Kennedie was getting ready earlier.

"Kennedie, what did you say? I didn't hear you."

"I said I don't want to be in pageants anymore, Momma." replied Kennedie, continuing to frown.

"Excuse me?"

"Momma, I wanna play softball," Kennedie said looking into the mirror.

"I bet Daddy would take me to the games."

"Absolutely not, Kennedie. You are not going to play softball. You are going to be in more pageants. Little Miss Cobb County is next month. I bet if you practice real hard with Miss Amy you can win that one, that way you'll qualify to be in Little Miss Alabama again next month."

Kennedie watched herself in the mirror as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, smearing her makeup across the middle of her round cheeks. She had even managed to get a little bit of the black goo on the tip of her round nose. She looked so silly with black makeup streaked all over her face, definitely not like a contestant in the Little Miss Alabama pageant. Kennedie couldn't help but laugh. As she looked at her face in the mirror, she thought she finally understood what the last judge had been trying to tell her.

I'll ask Daddy if I can play softball when I get home.

Untitled

Color Photograph

Luciana Carneiro

His Protest

Jessica Martinez

On Friday,
when I passed the picketers
and entered,
head hung, low down,
he did not hold my hand.

And when the nurse called
my surname,
asked me to sign,
asked me to undress,
dress, come back again,

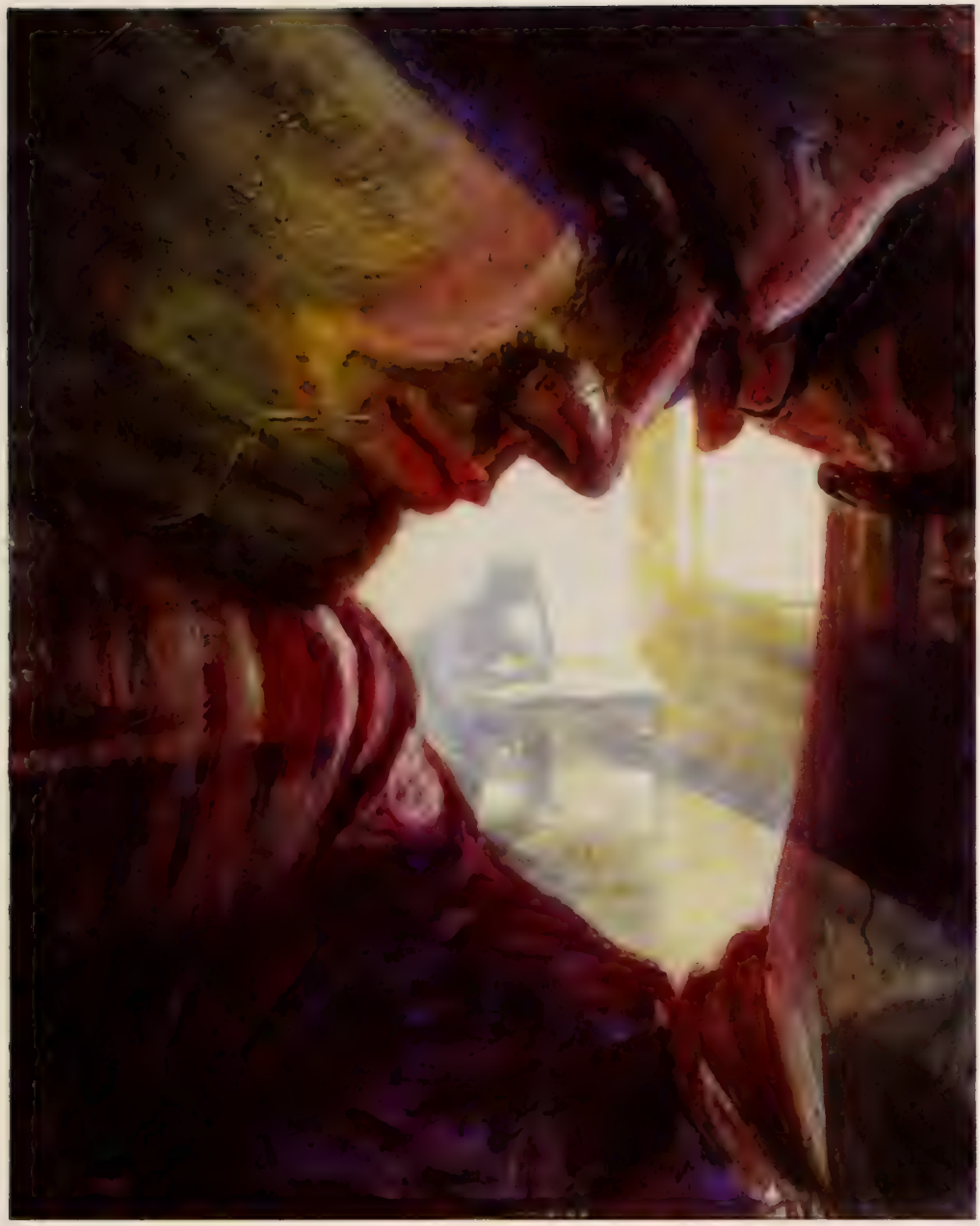
he was not there.
But on the third day,
when they draped the sheet
over my white legs,
and my knees rolled

to either side,
as heavy as stone,
wide as the grave,
he was there then—
inside me.

He was the hard thud
of my heart,
he later told me,
slowing as the fluids snaked
through my veins,

slowing so that I did not hear
the slurp and gurgle
of the aspirating machine,
churning as it usurped
will from my body—

he was there then, he said,
when the doctor touched
my shoulder, lied to me,
and told me,
"It's finished."



Solitude
Acrylic on Canvas
Greg Ferrell

Die Gurke

Joe O'Connor

"Honey . . . ?"

Oh crap. Ginger, can't you see I'm trying to sleep? Maybe if I just lay here she'll give up after awhile. Just as I thought these words my loving wife began to jab me in the side saying, "Honey, honey I'm hungry. Can you run down to the store and see they have some cucumbers?"

Why the hell does she want cucumbers? Screw this, I'm just gonna pretend like I'm asleep and pray that she'll get over her craving.

"Malcolm, baby, sweetie, honey. Stop playing around please, and just go get me some cucumbers. I'm hungry, and you know I'm not supposed to move around a lot."

"I know, Ginger, I know. But can it wait 'til ten?" I reached out a stick-like finger to caress her pale face. "We stayed up kinda late last night, and I'm just a little tired. Would that be okay?"

Her nails sunk into my arm, "Malcolm just get your lazy ass out of bed and go get me some damn cucumbers!"

"Jeez, woman," I said as I ripped my arm out of her grip. "Plan to kiss your baby with that mouth?"

Her blue eyes shot me a glare that said, "Sure, I'll kiss my baby, but I'm not so sure about kissing her daddy."

"Fine. I'll go. Hope somebody in this town knows English."

With that, I rolled out of bed and stumbled over to the dresser. I opened the top drawer and pulled on some clean boxers. I pulled open drawer number two to look for a shirt but noticed it was empty. I looked in drawer number three for a pair of pants and found it just as bare.

Looks like I'll be wearing something off the top of hamper today. Joy.

I managed to find a somewhat clean pair of pants and into its pockets went my keys, my cell phone, my English to German dictionary, and my Euro filled wallet. I threw on a paint-stained shirt and walked out the door.

We had only been in Germany for two weeks by that time, and already I was hating it. These people were just so cheerful and happy. It made me sick whenever one of our neighbors would come over with some kind of cake that was made for the sole purpose of clogging my arteries. I mean, I would be in the middle of a perfectly healthy salad when there would be a ringing at the door and, lo and behold, there was Helga Fundermier (sounds like a stereotype doesn't she?) standing at the door holding "ein Willkommenkuchen." And, of course, my wife just loved it. How could she not? She was pregnant (or so she claimed), and I was trying to diet, so she would be the only one eating that massive heap of transfat and sugar.

Being that we had only just recently moved to Germany, we did not have a car (I took the train into Munich), and so I had to walk half a mile down a dusty country road before I reached the main strip through Karlstadt. The only reason that this street was

the main road in Karlstadt was that it had something special: stop-lights. The main road in Karlstadt, Dudenstrasse, housed the only three stoplights in the whole town (if you can call it that). Yeah, I was in the boonies. To many people this wouldn't be a problem, but I'm not like many people. In fact, I'm not even like most people. After a lifetime of living in a box, seventeen stories above the ground, under a smog filled sky, I found the openness of the country rather imposing. How was I supposed to get anything done with sun shining in my face all day?

You see, back in New Jersey, things were different. There I was the director of creative affairs for the tri-state area (New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania), the one who set employee morale boosting programs, community service programs, and the like. And while I only had to gather together the ideas from my lackeys and sign my name to their ideas, the job was harder than it sounds. At work I was known as a hard-ass, but someone had to keep those hippies to the deadlines. But once I got back home from Smith & Global, Ginger took the reins. And that was the way we liked: I was relieved of all responsibility as soon as I walked in the door and gave Ginger a kiss hello.

But our routine started to change in November when I accepted a top position Munich that would start in February. I had known about the opening for a few months and, after talking it over with the wife, we both decided to jump at the opportunity to live abroad. But what I didn't know was that Ginger would let her excitement about moving overseas get in the way of keeping the house together after I came home from work. I started making our meals and doing the dishes while she sat on the computer looking up stuff that we could do in Germany. I was glad she was excited about the trip, but things were getting out of hand, especially when she decided to rent our house to her brother while we were gone. Apparently, she thought that Smith & Global was going to find and pay for a nice house for us to live in during our stay and that we wouldn't need the money raised in selling our house to help pay for our jaunt in Europe.

I bet we wouldn't be living in the boonies if I had just kicked her brother out and sold the damn house.

That thought hit me just as I walked onto the hard pavement of Dudenstrasse and into the blinding reflection of die Sonne bouncing off the windows of Karlstadt's only grocery store. After walking about halfway across Dudenstrasse, my cell phone rang.

"Hey Malcolm."

"What's up, Ginger? I haven't got the stuff yet, so you just chill out for a little bit."

"Oh that's great. Since you haven't found the cucumbers yet, can you get me some peach ice cream too?"

Why don't you walk down here yourself. You're only two months pregnant.

"Malcolm?"

"Um…sure. I'll pick it up. Okay, I'll see you later. Bye."

I closed my phone, looked up, blinding myself yet again, and, nearly tripping on the sidewalk in the process, made my way over to the front door. The lights were off. But, judging from the sign on the door, Wilhelm's Lebensmittelgeschäft (whatever that hell that meant) would be open in a matter of minutes. So I decided to kill the ten minutes by looking up some key German words.

Cub…Cuba…cubby…Cub Scout…cuckoo…cuddle…cud- wait a second, they skipped over

cucumber. Who skips over cucumber? Fucking bargain bin dictionaries! Let's see if it's got peach...nope. What the hell? Did the people who wrote this cheap piece of crap not eat their fruits and veggies as kids?

Grumbling over this profound lack of anything remotely helpful, I shoved the dictionary into my back pocket and slumped down, past the window, on to the ground. I closed my eyes, stretched my legs across the sidewalk, and thought back to that fateful evening back home.

It was the evening of January 6th and my presentation to the board of directors was due on the morning of the 8th, but I still managed to find enough time to sit down to a healthy dinner before rushing back to my work. As I walked into our dimly lit dining room, I eyed my wife and, noticing that she was glowing, slid down into my chair.

"What's got you in such a good mood tonight?" I asked as she twirled her auburn hair around a finger like a schoolgirl playing hard to get.

"Oh," she smiled "you'll find out soon enough. Just relax and enjoy your salad and soon everything will be much, much clearer."

"Um...okay." I'm not much for mystery, so I figured I could trust Ginger about telling me everything that was going on. In the meantime, I dove into the mountainous pile of lettuce, carrots, onions, and other assorted vegetables that my doctors had finally succeeded in restricting my diet to after my cholesterol spike in November. Just as I reached out for my glass of water, I noticed something strange.

"Wait a second. You have a steak."

"Yea--"

"But I thought you were going to help me stay on my diet by eating the same stuff I had to? I mean you even said something about needing to drop a few pounds and that it wouldn't be a big deal t--"

"Well, you see, Malcolm, something's come up which," she chewed on her lip, "has ...um complicated the situation."

I cocked my eyebrow toward the ceiling, "Really? What makes it so you can't go on a diet?"

"Honey, I'm still eating a salad," she motioned to the pathetic pile of greens on the tiny plate in front of her, "because I want to help you, but I can't eat only salad anymore. You see, I'm not just eating for myself anymore."

A half-chewed carrot fell from my gaping jaw and bounced off the side of the table.

"Wha?"

"Malcolm, we're going to have a baby!"

The words hung in the air like a trapeze artist caught in a photograph, and I nearly inhaled the rest of the salad that was in my mouth.

"Kaggghht," I spat a forkful of saliva soaked salad into my napkin. "Oh my God, Ginger. That's wonderful!"

Just as Ginger and I were about to embrace, a shadow came over me and what felt like a small car landed in my lap. The massive weight on my stomach and legs grinded my back against the concrete wall of the store, and when I tried to sit up I was blocked by the mountainous breasts of the obviously obese woman who was now lying on top of me.

"Eselloch! Du stolperst mich."

Eselloch, now there's a word I know.

"Sorry, lady, but maybe you should watch where you're walking so that you don't trip over people and flatten them like pancakes. And just for your information, that makes you the asshole. Now get off me, you're crushing my spleen."

She scowled and gritted her teeth at me as she pushed herself up from the ground, making sure to press my legs hard against the pavement as she got up and huffed her way into the now open store. As soon as the door closed, I pulled myself up from the ground, limped inside the store, and let the florescent light wash over me.

I rushed past the ever friendly door greeter and made my way to the fruit and veggie section. It was in the back of the store, and to get there I had to pass through the frozen food aisle so I decided to just grab the peach ice cream right off the bat instead of coming back for it later (that was a mistake). After passing by cases upon cases of Schokolade I finally found a case full of fruit flavored ice cream. I stood there with the door of case hanging wide open for ten minutes or so before I got the idea to stop trying to read the German inscriptions and focus on the pictures.

Okay well we've got banana, cherry, raspberry, orange, some blueberry nut stuff. And aha peach!

I thrust my arm into the freezing case of desserts and, just as I pulled back my arm and slammed the door shut, someone touched my shoulder.

"Herr Ipswich?

Just when I was hoping to get out of here without any hold ups. "Hallo Frau Fundermier. How are you? I mean...uh…uh… wie geht es dir?"

"Es geht ausgezeichnet! Un du?

I lost most of that but I knew she was having a great day and wanted to know how mine was going. Part of me really wanted to say exactly how crappy things were going, but in the end I decided to spare her my troubles.

"Ah… Es geht gut aber I…ich…" I struggled with my dictionary. "Bin…um… eid…dafrig."

"Was?" She shook her head, oblivious to the fact that most of her grey hair had just fallen out of the bun on the top of her head and was now a tangled mess sitting on her shoulder.

I waved my ice cream at her and said, very slowly, "I'M BUSY I HAVE TO GO."

"Was?"

I waved once more and then sprinted down the rest of the aisle. I was at my final destination; now all I had to do was find a damn cucumber and I could get the hell out of this place. I paced back and forth scanning the wall mounted cases for anything green and, as luck would have it, all things green were lumped together in the far right corner. Eyeing this, I bounded over to the corner and parked myself in front of it. There were green beans, green squash, green apples, green grapes, green peppers, green onions, those funky green banana things that nobody ever buys, lettuce, zucchinis, celery, broccoli, limes, okra, asparagus, avocados, peas and spinach. To be quite honest, I didn't think I had ever seen that much green. But as much as it pleased me to see most of my favorite foods set out before me, I was still dumfounded that amidst this sea of green there were no cucumbers to be found anywhere. Not a single one.

"Shit."

Any other man would have taken this lack of cucumbers to mean that his wife was just going to be out of luck but, as I have said before, I am not like other men. I was not willing face Ginger without the rather phallic object of her desire. The last time she sent me to hunt down her craving, I "totally ignored" her request to bring back some tilapia. In the past, this slight offense might have resulted in me going back to the store the next day for chocolate and flowers, but three weeks ago it had resulted in me sleeping on the couch for two days (that couch was a piece of shit and my back hurt for the next week after I was forced to sleep on it). I wasn't going to go through that again. There had to be some fucking cucumbers around here somewhere.

A few feet over, a skinny red-headed boy in his late teens was piling carrots onto a display. I tapped his shoulder.

"Kann ich hefle Sie?"

Realizing that I didn't know how to ask him about what I needed, I held up a finger hoping he understood that I needed a minute and I pulled out my dictionary. I must have looked like quite the ignorant tourist, with my greasy hair and three day stubble, standing there flipping through a dictionary that had a dog ear on every page. My search for German words must have been taking awhile because after about five minutes he asked:

"Ja, was brauchen Sie?"

"Dude, gimme a second okay? Ah, screw it." I threw down my dictionary in disgust. "Ich brauchen a cucumber. Where can I find some?"

"Was brauchen Sie zu finden?"

"Like I said: Ich brauchen a cucumber zu finden."

His fingers slid over his lips, and his eyes looked to the ceiling. "A cucumber?"

"Yeah, ya got any?"

He shrugged. "Das tut mir Leid aber ich verstehe nicht."

"Yeah, well, I don't really understand you either. Thanks for nothing, Scheisskopf."

I walked away without even waiting for him to return my insult. I marched back to the stand of greens and began to sift through the piles of fruits and vegetables with the vain hope of finding my salvation. I ransacked every shelf from the avocados to the zucchinis, not caring about the stares of the faceless Germans who were picking out there own vegetables, but fate was still against me. Defeated, with my hands damp from digging through the fruits and vegetables, I walked back through the dessert aisle, where I should have replaced the now melting ice cream but instead made my way to a register.

I guess I'll be sleeping on the couch again. Chalk one up to German grocery stores. Way to go, guys!

I stepped in line behind an elderly German lady, and began to think up some very elaborate lies to tell my wife upon my return.

Honey, I walked to the store, but when I got there it was on fire. There were firefighters all over the place. I told them about how you were pregnant and just needed a cucumber, but they didn't understand and just ignored me. I even sneaked in the back, but one of the firefighters grabbed me and dragged me out of the store before I could get to the vegetables.

No, that's not gonna work; I still have the ice cream. This one might though. Ginger, I got those cucumbers for you, but when I got to the register, the manager came out from the back and told me that I couldn't buy them because he said there was a recall on them. Yeah, I know it's weird that they would

keep recalled stuff out on the shelves, but I guess they do stuff differently here. But hey, I was able to get your ice cream.

Hmm…nope that's still too weak. What about thi-- wait a second. What does that old biddy got in her hand?

During my ramblings, I never bothered to look in the basket of the old crone in line in front of me (the only things I had even registered about her were the overpowering smell of the mango perfume and the horribly blue floral dress she was wearing) but as she starting handing over her items to the clerk I shifted my gaze to her hands. As she emptied the contents of the flimsy plastic bin, I noticed something green fall onto the rubber conveyor belt.

Where the fuck did she get a cucumber?

"Uhhh…Frau?"

"Ja. Hast du eine Frage?"

"Ja." I held up a hand and said, "Ein Moment, bitte," while my other hand reached into my back pocket for my dictionary. But, of course, I had forgotten to pick it back up after my conversation back at the wall of greens.

Oh shit.

"Hallo?" She waved a boney hand in my face. "Was ist deine Frage?"

"Umm… I need to know where you got that." I pointed to the cucumber. She picked it up and asked "Sie?"

"Yeah, sure, sie, where did you find sie?"

"Ich finde sie."

"Yeah I know you found it but where? Where did you find it?"

"I habe schon sagen: Ich finde sie." And with that she turned her back on me.

What a bitch. I was just looking for some help.

The woman finished checking out and, as she grabbed her bags from the turnstile, she looked at me and, with a sad smile, shook her head. Just as she lifted her bags to leave, the ice cream slid out of my hands and sloshed on to the floor. The woman bent over as if to grab at the now liquefied frozen treat, but I grabbed at her frail age-spot covered arms before she could pick it up.

I looked into her pale, sunken eyes and, remembering the words the red-headed clerk used, said "I…Ich brauchen einem cucumber, bitte."

The old woman just started at me crinkling her nose as she asked "Was?"

To be all honest, I wasn't sure what I was doing either.

"Cucumbererin. Du hast ein cucumber! Ich…ich… I need that cucumber."

She struggled with my grip and, using only her eyes, pleaded with me to let go. Finally, those wrinkled old eyes won me over and I let go of her. She gathered up her remaining bags and shot me a nasty glance as I retreated back to the register.

"You know what? Fuck this!" I was getting sick of this shit anyway. Ginger would just have to deal with it because I wasn't going to sleep on the couch again.

I heard a gasp right before the old woman's handbag rattled against my ear. My slush covered hands shot up, shielding the right side of my head, but I was too late.

"Owwww! What the fuck was that for, lady?"

It didn't really hurt that much, but being slapped in the face by an elderly German woman was kind of a shock to my system. In my desperate state, I didn't even see the

ancient hag pumping her arm for swing number two, though it did hurt quite a bit more. Now my ear was bleeding and the other customers, many of whom I had bumped into on my quest, began to crowd around and cheer on my attacker.

There I was, in the middle of some god damned Bavarian village, being beaten by someone's grandmother at the local market. This was all Ginger's fault. And now I was going to be chased back to our über (there's a nice German word for ya) expensive, yet very small, house and as soon as I opened the door I was going to be bitched out not only had I brought an angry mob to the door but I had left the cucumbers and peach ice cream back at the store in my mad dash from a bunch of elderly women. Or that's what I thought would happen but as we all know old ladies don't move too quickly so I lost them after running about two blocks in the opposite direction from the house.

Turning the corner put me on Elkstrasse, which ran parallel to the dirt road that led to my house and made me at loss as to where to go from there. I could either go back to Dudenstrasse with the hopes that the lynch mob had dispersed, or I could try and find alternate directions, which would be hard because of the loss of my dictionary but not impossible. I chose option B and proceeded to walk across the street and into the Möbellageraum in hopes of finding someone who could show me how to get back home.

As soon as I walked in the door the musky smell of leather couches greeted me. Apparently this place was furniture store, which gave me an idea.

"Ginger?"

"Yes, dear, did you get lost on the way from the store? I can't really give you any directions or anything, bu--"

"I'm fine Ginger. I was just wondering if you were serious when you said you wanted to replace the couch last week."

"Of course I was. Why?"

"Oh, no reason. I'll be back home in a little bit. Bye"

Closing my phone before Ginger had the chance to say goodbye, I smiled. I was bitched-out later over the ice cream and cucumbers, but at least I slept like a king on our new couch.

Classical Martini

Colored Pencil

Chad Roberts

Ode to the Help Desk

Michelle Crabb

The bronze doorknob glistened in the Monday morning sun, giving it a false pretense of glamour and glitz. I closed my eyes, drew a deep breath, and whispered a prayer to whatever deity that happened to be listening. I reached my hand towards it and paused, my fingers just barely touching the cold bronze. I opened my eyes, took another deep breath.

I hated Mondays.

I hated Tuesdays.

In fact, I hated every day that didn't start with an "S." I narrowed my eyes and grasped the dreaded knob. I opened up the heavy door to what would be my doom for the next eight hours (if I was lucky). The door opened up into a large room with carpet that was as hard as cement. I looked down and shuffled my feet. *Nah, it had to be harder than cement.* I lifted my head back up and scanned the room; people were walking slowly with their shoulders slumped in defeat. Whatever happiness and freedom they experienced during their weekends were gone.

I, too, slumped my shoulders and wandered through the cubicle maze to my own small cell in the dreary prison. I sat down in my chair and logged into my computer. As it was booting up, my eyes drifted over to my accursed phone. My body involuntarily shuddered. Any moment, the blasted thing would start ringing non-stop. I looked up at the beloved break room. Perhaps, I could dart in there and grab a soda before the customers would start calling. Just as I was getting out of my seat, my phone rang.

I groaned, took a deep breath, and picked it up.

"Vista Tech Help Desk. How may I help you?" I asked in an overly cheerful voice.

"Oh, um, hi," a nervous sounding lady answered, "I can't get my email." I rolled my eyes when customers claimed that their email didn't work; ninety-nine percent of the time, the problem had nothing to do with the email servers or email itself.

"Alright," I said, straightening up in my chair. Getting the true problem out of them was a delicate art form. "Are you able to log into the network?"

"No," She replied.

"When you log in, what kind of error are you receiving?"

"Um, error?" She asked stupidly. I slapped my forehead in frustration.

"When you try to log in," I said, "And try to type in your password, what does the screen say?"

"Oh!" She exclaimed as if she suddenly understood everything there was to know about the inner workings of computers. "Well, I'm not getting that either."

"Not getting what?"

"The log in screen."

"Oh, well, that's not good," I said with a fake laugh. She laughed along with me. "What is on your monitor at this very moment?"

"Nothing. It's completely black!"

"Alright. Is the small light in one of the bottom corners of it on?"

"No."

"Okay, the monitor might have been shut off, go ahead and press the power button for it," I instructed.

"Our power is out." She stated matter of factly.

"Beg your pardon?" I leaned foreword. *Did she just say what I think she did!?*

"Our entire building cannot get power for some reason. Everyone's computer is dark and the lights are out—"

"Hold on, one second," I moved the phone away from my ear and turned around in my chair. *Was this lady nuts!? What makes her think that computer technicians could fix the bloody power!?* I looked up and noted that one of my coworkers was looking at me weirdly.

"I'll tell you later," I mouthed. I turned back to the phone.

"Well, you need to talk to your building custodian about getting a generator or temporary power until they fix it. If, by that time, you are having network issues, go ahead and give us a call."

"Oh, a generator! That is a good idea, thanks!" She said happily. She hung up. I had the sick feeling that somehow she was the building custodian. I hung the phone up and leaned back in my chair.

"You've got to be kidding me," I said out loud. My coworker came bounding into my cubicle.

"So?" He looked giddy with excitement.

"You won't believe this. In fact, I'm not even sure if I believe it myself," I quickly told him about my phone call. When I was finished, his eyes nearly bulged out of his head.

"Yes, I do not lie!" I stated. His face turned bright red, and he burst into laughter.

"Careful," I said, "Dictator McAdams will come around this corner faster than—" I was already too late. Mr. McAdams came storming around the corner.

"You two," He stated, "are here to work, not to make friends!" He glared at us. "I'm not warning you again." He spun around and marched off to his office, which, unfortunately, wasn't far from where I sat.

"I told you," I sighed. McAdams was the reason I and every one of my coworkers hated the place. He ran it with an iron fist, so much so that he made Iron Maggie look like Mother Theresa. I turned back to my monitor, and I heard my coworker sulk back to his. A sigh escaped my lips as I looked over the paperwork that I had to fill out. Hopefully with that entire building out, there wouldn't be as many people calling today, I thought. With any luck, I might be able to finish the paperwork by noon.

I started on it and answered a few phone calls as I worked. An hour or two passed and a loud noise filled the room. I winced. The noise was McAdams announcing a sudden mandatory meeting of up most importance. I groaned. He *always* made these meetings and anything from a few cookie crumbs left in the break room to someone leaving their lights on outside was mandatory of up most importance. I sighed and lifted the receiver of my phone to prevent anyone from calling during the meeting.

"Everyone!" His loud voice boomed throughout the room. Several people had already gathered around. I swung around in my chair, making no move to get up. *Leave the standing to the brownnosers,* I thought. Once everyone was turned and paying attention to him, he started the meeting.

"It's that time of year," He huffed, "I need four volunteers to stay late all week and help me do inventory. You will be paid overtime," I sank back in my chair and scooted a little into my cubicle. *Don't call my name*, I pleaded, *Don't call my name!* I sank as low as I could without looking weird.

As expected two hands shot up.

"Smith and Erikson," He stated, giving the two most prominent brownnosers curt nods. "I can always count on you two. Now, we need some fresh blood," His dark eyes scanned the room, searching for innocent victims. His eyes came to my side of the room. My heart raced, *hide!* My mind screamed, "*Hide!*" I balled my hands into tight fists, "*Gods, don't pick me!*"

"Jenson!" I swore profusely under my breath and stood up.

"Yes, sir?" I asked slowly. He was already searching for his last victim.

"And . . . O'Brian," He called. O'Brian sat in the cubicle next to me; I could hear him mutter under his breath.

"You four will stay after all week," He snapped his fingers, Smith sprang forward, carrying McAdams's infamous black notebook. Just the sight of that notebook made everyone shudder in fear. He took it and opened it up.

"Today I need everyone to stay late an extra hour to clean up." I scowled.

"We clean up as we go," I snapped, forgetting my place. I immediately regretted my foolishness. McAdams's cold eyes locked mine in a frightening gaze.

"There were four wrappers left in the break room Friday afternoon." He hissed. "And you ALL know what that means. I do not like having to repeat myself everyday! You are all adults and will act like them! Your mommies aren't here to clean up after you. This will happen every time someone leaves their garbage out. And you will all stay the full hour!"

"Not if we clean it up fast enough," I said.

"Oh, yes you will," He stated. "And next time someone decides to leave their wrapper, they will think twice." He clapped his large hands, "Back to work!" He shouted.

"That man is the definition of evil," I hissed. I glanced at O'Brian who was looking at me with curiosity. I gave him a weird look. Usually O'Brian picked on me.

"Gorgon Hunter," He said. I sighed. Gorgon Hunter was the nickname he gave me ever since he found out that I used to play Dungeons and Dragons.

"There's some fire in ya," He stated. "I say," he leaned against his cubicle wall, "I think with you as our ringleader, we can take him,"

"What on Earth are you talking about? I don't know if you're blind, but I'm a small woman of only five feet, three inches! And he is at least 6 feet tall *and* he's got to have two hundred pounds to him!"

"We all hate him. We all despise him. He makes our lives a living hell."

"What are you getting at? We can't exactly do anything."

"We can stick it to him."

"What, by egging his car? That's real creative," I rolled my eyes.

"How do you know about that?" He asked in shock. I shook my head. "Anyways," he went on, "Look at how he torments us as if we were his slaves! I can't take much more of this!"

"So what's your cunning plan?" I asked sarcastically. O'Brian was known for using his fists rather than his brains.

"We write a petition, we all sign it," He spoke as if he were making a glorious battle plan. "Then," he leaned forward, "We send it off to Division!" His fingers dug into the divider that separated our cubicles, "With *all* of our signatures, they will *have* to replace him!"

"Smith and Erikson will never sign it," I said.

"He can't make us work late just because someone forgot to throw away a few candy wrappers," He whined. I looked over my shoulder. Smith was coming towards us.

"Good idea," I said, "That is brilliant for working on inventory." Smith passed us and gave each of us a smile. I sat down at my chair, O'Brian still leaning over the side of the cubicle.

"So, kill any Gorgons last night?" He snickered. "Or catch any wizards?"

"Yes, O'Brian, I caught a dozen wizards and killed a thousand Gorgons." I put my phone back on the receiver.

Another hour went by. I looked at my watch. It was time for my morning soda. I usually got a little cranky if I didn't have any caffeine in my body by ten. I lifted my phone off the receiver

"Taking a ten," I announced, getting out of my chair. I leaned over and opened up one of the drawers to my desk and took out a book. My ten minute break was one of the few moments I could relax. I tucked the book under my arm and strolled to the break room.

"Hey, Mark," I said. Mark worked on the email servers. He ignored me and just stood in front of the door to the break room, looking dazed.

"It's locked—" He whispered.

"What?" I pushed him aside and jiggled the door knob. Sure enough it was locked. I wrapped my fingers tightly around it and forced it down as hard as I could, hoping brute force would somehow unlock it. My cunning plan failed miserably, I snapped back my hand and whimpered. Cold steel hurts when you try to force it, I thought.

"Oh, guys, just in time," Smith came up. He was holding some sort of flyer in his hand.

"Oh," he stated, "Jenson."

"Yes?" I asked, not really caring, I just wanted him to unlock the door to my precious sodas.

"I'm having a party Saturday at noon. You're invited." He leaned closer to me, "It's work only, so please don't bring anyone,"

"Okay," I answered.

"Great! I'll forward you the snappy invitation I made, oh, and we will have plenty of games and prizes." Wait, I thought, what did I just say yes to? I slapped my hand on my forehead. This day was just getting worse and worse.

"Don't worry, everyone wins something in the end, but it's a surprise. Oh," he looked up, "The theme for my party is Hawaii, so dress accordingly, like a Hawaiian shirt." He laughed. The sound was like gurgling mouthwash.

"Hawaii," I mumbled, "Got it—"

"Good, and now," he moved past us and taped the flyer onto the break room door,

"Is it broken or something?" I asked. He smirked.

"Just read," he said. I scowled and looked at it.

"Oh that's uncalled for!"

"Don't kill the messenger!" He lifted his hands, "I'm only a messenger." He backed away and gave me a sheepish smile. If I were O'Brian, I would have punched him.

"Why didn't he say this in the meeting!?" I demanded.

"Hey, I'm only the messenger boy! Now, don't forget my party! Directions will be included in the invitation!"

"I can't believe McAdams would go this far—" Mark sounded like as if he were about to burst into tears any moment.

"This can't be legal," I stated, looking at the flyer. "He can't take our breaks and lunches away from us."

"But most of us are salary—" he whined.

"Even so," I said, "This has to be illegal,"

"It's not," Smith said behind us, "you can look it up in the handbook if you want."

"Gee, thanks for the advice," I snarled. Smith clamped his hand on my shoulder.

"Cheer up, only six more days until Hawaiian fun!" He let go of me and walked off.

"I wasn't even invited," Mark frowned.

"Want my invitation?" I offered.

"I never get invited anywhere," he leaned his head on the door and closed his eyes.

"This can't be in the handbook!" I spun around and marched back to my desk, leaving a very distraught Mark behind. I couldn't believe the flyer. Who did McAdams think he was? Did he take sick pleasure in abusing his position? I made it back to my desk and fumbled through my drawers until I found my handbook. I flipped it open and searched for what Smith was talking about. As I scanned the boring pages, I could hear people groan and swear under their breaths. Evidently, the masses had found the flyer.

"No way," My fingers ran down the long list of rules and regulations. There it was in plain English.

"No way—" I shook my head. I looked at it more closely, then, I remembered something. An evil grin pleaded my lips. A plan was formulating in my mind.

"O'Brian," I stated loudly.

"Yo," He said through his cubicle,

"We are taking back the office," I said. Just as I was about to explain my cunning plan, my phone rang. I blinked and slapped my forehead. Out of habit, I had put it back on the receiver when I got back to my desk.

"Vista Tech Help Desk. How may I help you?"

"I can't get to the internet," a male voice stated.

"Can you log into the network?"

"Network? If you mean can I log into my computer, yes,"

"Is your email working?"

"Hmm," I waited. "Yes," he answered a moment later. I nodded my head.

"Alright, can you pull up Internet Explorer and tell me what you see,"

"What's Internet Explorer?" He asked. I grunted and slapped my forehead. Honestly, how did some of these people dress themselves!?

"It is what you use to surf the internet with."

"Oh, ok," I waited for him to open up his browser. "Hmm, well, it's working now. I don't know what happened earlier. Well, sorry for bothering you."

"It's okay, and if you have anymore problems, don't hesitate to call," I stated. The phone rang several more times, and I had to put aside my plan to knock that no good McAdams out for later. When I got a break in phone calls, I worked on my devious scheme by typing an email to everyone on the floor; save for Smith and Erikson. My fingers lingered over the enter button, I let out a cackle and then pressed it.

"Good bye!" I sneered. The phone rang.

"Vista Tech Help Desk. How may I help you?"

"I can't log into my account," An angry voice hissed.

"Oh my," I said.

"Indeed. It keeps saying I'm locked out."

"Can I get your full name and building address?" I asked. He gave me his information and I pulled up his account on my monitor. His account was locked. Likely, he had typed his password in wrong three times.

"I see your account here and yes, it is locked out,"

"Why would it do that!?" He nearly shouted. I could hear him breathing deeply into the phone.

"Well, sir," I started, "The system is automatically set to lock out after three failed password attempts for security purposes."

"That's preposterous!" He cried, "I need to get into my account to work! And I have never typed my password in wrong!"

"Sir, you did because it said so on my log,"

"I certainly did not!" He shouted, "I have that password memorized by heart! There has to be an error in your system!"

"I assure you sir, there isn't. It is possible that you accidentally had caps lock on," I was fighting hard to keep my cool with this guy.

"I did not type my password in wrong! You are just not doing your job! Your system is flawed!"

"Sir, please, just be more careful next time, okay?"

"Careful!? Who is your supervisor!? Who is running things over there!? I happen to have a very busy day and I cannot be held back by trivial inconveniences like this!"

"Sir—" I rolled my eyes and looked at my computer screen. Several people had already responded to my email! I leaned forward and clicked on their replies. They were all positive and agreed to go through with my call to action!

"—You can't expect us to believe that your system is flawless! I know my password!" He went on like this for a good ten minutes. Company policy specifically stated that we could not hang up on customers. I pulled at my hair in frustration. This guy was a real jerk. Perhaps, he was related to McAdams somehow.

"Sir, if you are really worried about missing work," I gathered all the courage I could muster, "Maybe you should stop yelling at me and get back to work."

"What!?"

"I'm not the one who typed my password in wrong and lost my temper about it." The other side of the line got quiet. I knew I was drawing the line, but this guy had nearly called me everything in the book!

"Well, I—"

"Good day." I hung up and then called him a few colorful metaphors. I heard someone shouting in the distance. I stood up and could see McAdams screaming at Mark. Mark was literally cowering in fear. I clenched my fists. *That does it.* I cleared my throat.

"Comrades," I shouted as loud as I could. "The time is now!" I lifted my fist in the air. "We walk!" I shouted triumphantly. I heard a roar from O'Brian.

"Good day to you, McAdams and we shall never see your fat pathetic face again!" I marched towards the door, proud with my army of coworkers in toe behind me. I lifted both my hands up and gave McAdams the Bird as I stormed past him. I kicked open the metallic door that held us prisoner every day and walked straight to the parking lot. When I was outside, I whirled around to face my troops.

"Eh!?" O'Brian was the only one in the parking lot. "O'Brian, did anyone follow?"

"Not that I saw," He stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"What!? But I saw a lot of their replies and they all agreed!" I pulled at my hair. O'Brian looked up at the tall building,

"People will say a lot of things," he said, "but most of the time, they don't go through with it," he looked at me, "I'm surprised in ya, didn't know you had such spirit in that Gorgon infested heart of yours."

"I *hate* McAdams," I growled. "I can't believe this—they didn't come! I was so sure they would! Especially after they read my email, where I pointed out that McAdams himself added that bull about the taking away lunches and breaks!" I started pacing back and forth. "Man, he's gonna fire us…I told him I never had to see his fat face again! To his face!"

"Don't worry about it," O'Brian sat down on the sidewalk and pulled out a pack of smokes. He extended it to me, and I shook my head. He shrugged and stuck one in his mouth.

"I flipped him off…with both hands! We are going to be fired and he will write bad reviews about us so that no one else will hire us!" I put my hand to my forehead. "What was I thinking!?"

"You wanted lunch."

"Man—" I sighed, "I am *not* brownnosing to get back in good graces…"

"Don't worry about it," He said, lighting his cigarette. I glared at him. How could he be so calm at a time like this!? I continued pacing and fretting. I had never done something so bold and stupid in my entire life! I wrung my hands together and bit my lower lip. I wasn't sure how long I had been pacing, but it must have been awhile because my legs were getting tired, and O'Brian was on his second cigarette. I stopped and sat down on the sidewalk next to him.

"Just wait," he said calmly. I looked at him.

"For what?" I was honestly surprised that McAdams hadn't come out here yet to scream at us or send either Smith or Erikson in his place. A sleek black Sedan drove into the parking lot. O'Brian put his cigarette out and stood up. The black Sedan pulled into an empty parking space. A man and a woman in their mid forties dressed in business attire walked out of the Sedan towards us. O'Brian met them midway,

"We got your call," the woman said. "The nerve of that boss of yours!" She folded

her arms.

"Thank you for coming, I wouldn't have called if it wasn't important—"

"Oh, I know, dear," She said, waving him off. "But in less than ten minutes, he will be walking out this door unemployed." She narrowed her eyes, "That's what he gets for messing with our son!" The man next to her nodded in agreement. I stood up and silently observed their conversation. The couple was obviously O'Brian's parents; they had the same curly hair he did, and his father had the same sky blue eyes.

"Oh, dear me," the woman huffed, "Still smoking?" She shook her head, "That stuff is rotten for you."

"I tried to quit, but McAdams was so horrible—I just—" She patted his shoulder.

"There, there, it's alright now." The door to the building slammed open and a very red McAdams came storming out. He was instantly intercepted by Mr. and Mrs. O'Brian.

"A foul creature like you deserves to be in prison," Mrs. O'Brian stated. "You treat your employees as if they are chattel!" McAdams balled his fists and did not reply. She spun on her heels.

"Come, husband, we have more important matters to attend to," Her husband obeyed and followed her off into black sedan. Meanwhile, McAdams managed to disappear.

"What just happened?" I asked.

"I called my parents," he replied.

"Tell me something I don't know, Captain Obvious." I folded my arms.

"My parents made a considerable donation to Division and mentioned that McAdams was running his section like a sweatshop." He snapped his fingers, "And McAdams was fired."

"Wha—" I scratched my head.

"Veronica," he stated, "In this world, money is everything," He turned towards the building,

"But we were supposed to defeat him with our iron wills and determination!" I cried.

"Meh," he shrugged and opened the door for me to enter.

"Well," I sighed, "I wonder what the new boss will be like…"

Warsaw, 1943

Kevin Daiss

And that was the last of her I'd ever see.

(I made sure that my suit was clean pressed,
I was my best dressed, I was clean-shaven
After months of nothingness, wanting,
N'more than a soft hand's final caress.)

The blood boiled over,
One evening, 1943.
The wives and the children
All shookshuddered and screamed.
The men were all but too reticent;
A mess of bones. Shoeless shuffling feet.

And that was the last of her I'd ever see.
My not-yet wife, buried beneath,

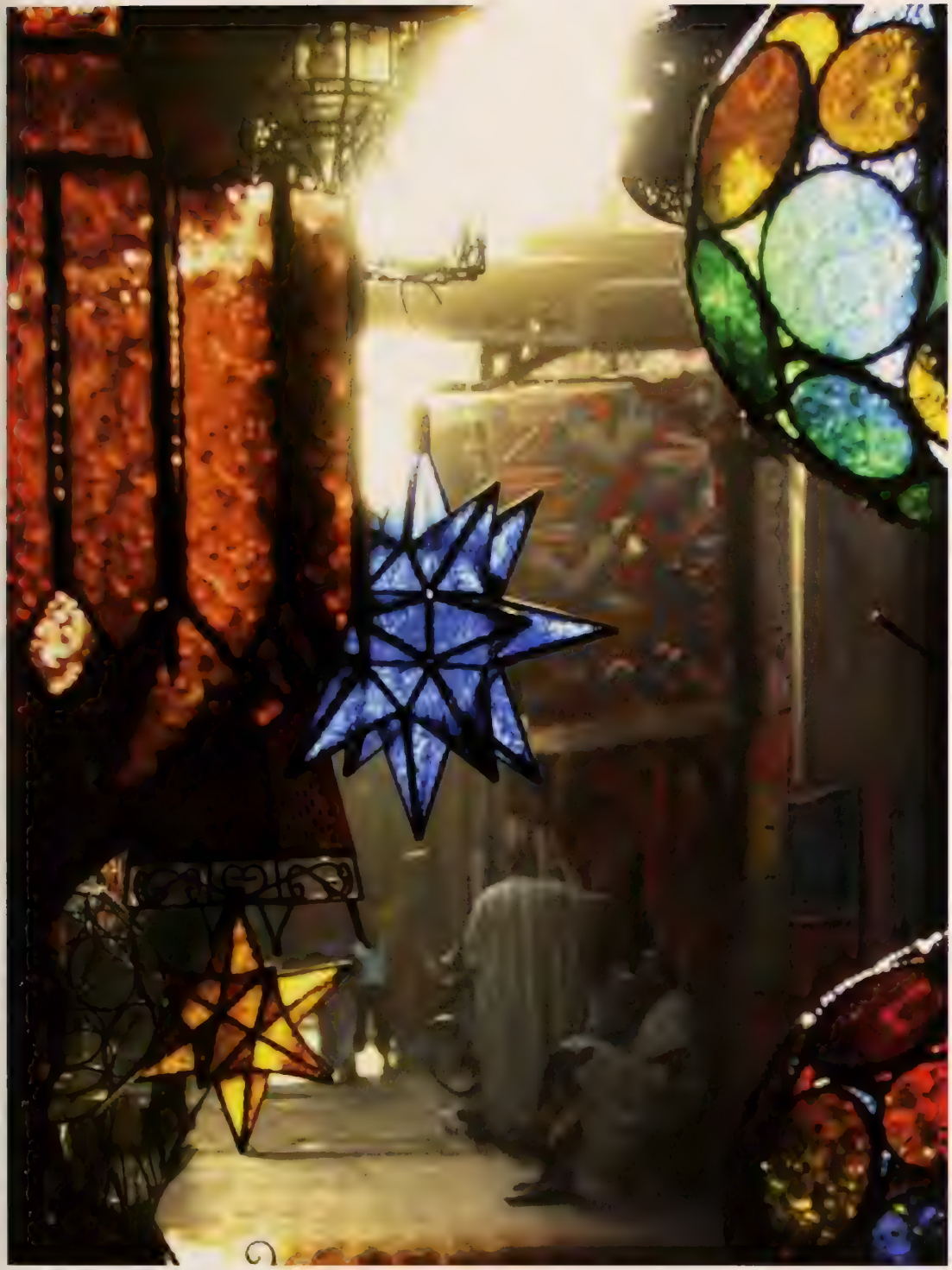
A heap of rubbish—our neighbors turn'd ash—

And taken down with her a seedling of me,
Our unborn child, face ever unseen.

The voices that raked hot coals on our feet
Were not hard to distinguish once I myself was tossed to the heap:
I never did die, but I grew into not me.
Charred ruins of soul, turn'd outward for all to see,
I tossed to the heap my faith and my kind,
And flushed the ghettos 'til the stars blinded my eyes
With the brilliant blues, and the gushing of white.

I avoided the rape of David cemetery,
By trading life for lust
Of more air to breathe.

And that was the last of her I ever did see.



al-Maghribiyyah 2

Color Photograph

Jeremy Windus

Tom's Wigs

Jie Chen

1.

If you walked through this small campus, sometimes you could meet a boy. His name was Tom. He was 19 years old. People thought that he was weird because he liked wearing wigs. Someone said that he had fallen in love with a Chinese girl, but this girl left him at last. He was still waiting for her to come back because this girl never thought Tom was weird, and she loved him, too.

2.

This Chinese girl's name was Chyi. She was a runaway wife. She escaped from her family in New Mexico where she had been living with her white husband for three years. Her husband was a selfish and wicked man. Since they got married, she was confined by her husband in that big ranch house and was not allowed to work or to get in touch with any men. He beat her and abused her when he was in a bad mood. Chyi was a fragile and sensitive woman. She did not know how to use the law to protect herself. The only thing that she could do was to flee, to hide herself from her husband.

She came to New York. She got a job as a caretaker for a 90 year old woman. She lived with the elderly woman for two years. And then she suddenly realized that her life could not be like the dead water without ripple. After all, she was just thirty years old. She was a singer in China seven years ago. Many people adored her. However, her current situation was quite different. She felt depressed as if she became the dead leaves floating down to the ground, never alive again.

Alive, she needed to be alive. She told herself: life could not be like this.

She decided to go to college to learn how to play piano. Piano could help her cope with the tedious and monotonous life. At least she could forget her unfortunate marriage, her suffering and her distress.

3.

There she came. She came to a small campus in Savannah where people could easily meet repititiously. She liked to meet people. Since her life was isolated in New Mexico and New York, her world was dark and narrow, and she felt suffocated as if she lived in a wild desert, no fresh air, no water. She was looking for something, something that might make her breathe again.

There he came. He came like refreshing and clean water flowing down from the tranquil river. His name was Tom. He was Chyi's piano classmate. Tom was a silent boy and did not like to talk. He was sitting opposite to her in the piano class, like a feather slightly and gently, flying down in front of her.

The classroom was small. It could accommodate just six students. They needed to play the piano face to face. Tom sat before Chyi. Thus, she could not avoid seeing him. She felt awkward when their eyes caught each other at the same time. She tried to smile at him to break the embarassing situation. She did not expect him to react, but he did smile back, gently and sweetly.

She noticed that Tom was playing very well. He was always absorbed in playing his

piano like a good-tempered dog concentrating on what he is doing. His fingers were slim and long like skinny bamboo. They were dancing on the keyboard, sometimes touching the keyboard softly and tenderly, and sometimes jumping quickly and strongly.

Although she could not hear what he was playing because they had their headphones on, she could feel it was a vivid piece. A special feeling arose from her heart. She could not explain it, but she might be drawn by something, something coming from a quiet boy, Tom. Was it envy? Or affection? Or something else…?

She started to observe him.

Tom was very tall and quite skinny like a lone pine tree standing upright. He had an Asian face mixed with Spanish disposition. His eyes were black deep water. You never knew what he was thinking when he was staring at you. He had a well-shaped nose that stood straight forward, and it framed his small and thin lips. His hair was dark black like the exuberant forest, deep and mysterious.

4.

Tom was always late. When he entered the classroom, Chyi would catch a glimpse of him. She even knew how he dressed up and what kind of perfume he used. One time, to her curiosity, she found out that Tom's hair became golden and curly, which was in sharp contrast with his black and dense eyebrows. Chyi thought that he might have dyed his hair, but the next day it became dark black and straight again.

Tom wore wigs.

Chyi was a little surprised, because his appearance was traditional and conservative. His wigs did not quite fit his dressing: he liked wearing dark blue cotton jackets with neat cotton shirts inside. If it was cold, he would dress in a well-knitted light gray wool sweater. He liked wearing Tommy cloth shoes.

"Who was he? Why did this elegant boy have wigs on his head?" Chyi wondered.

5.

Everyone has a story. If you did not know him, he would never tell you what happened to him. Tom and Chyi were like two straight lines parallel to each other. Silence made them keep a distance, as if they would never care about each other. As a matter of fact, Tom was also observing Chyi.

Tom was a southern boy, son of a single mother. He was born near-sighted. When he was five years old, the doctor found out that he had bad sight, which could even cause him to be blind. His mother prepared him thick glasses, and he was laughed at by all his little classmates. From that time on, he lost self-confidence. He became silent and conservative. He did not like to talk, but he was quite strong. He was struggling to study hard, and he told himself, "I can do it." He was good at playing piano; then he was sent into a gifted class.

When he grew up, he knew how to hide himself. He wore wigs to cover his handicap, his near blind eyes. Through playing piano, he could temporarily forget his sorrow, his abnormity, his difference from others. He never looked at people, not because of his shyness but of his self-denial. He was afraid that people would laugh at him. Although he wore contact lenses, his eyes had no expression and could not say anything: joy or sorrow.

Since he met Chyi, he felt that she was smiling at him honestly and naturally. He knew that she was not teasing him. He did not feel uncomfortable when he faced Chyi. He realized that he might fall in love with this mysterious girl. He began to put on elegant perfume, and he made himself neat and beautiful. He always came to the class very late, because he wanted her to notice him. However, he did not know how to tell her, how to break the silence down between them.

Chyi was also quiet to Tom. Yes, she was silent because she was quite paradoxical: a married woman should be responsible for her family and her husband. Did she still love her husband? No, she did not think so, but at least she did not divorce him. As an Asian girl, she was conservative. There was always a voice in her heart saying: "You are not a simple woman. How can you allow yourself to love some one? Do you think that you can afford it, if you let him know your complicated situation?"

She felt guilty. She never observed a man like this. However, she could not stop caring about him as if the boat lost the oar, being out of control.

She wanted to see him. She wanted to talk to him, but she did not know how to start it because she was not sure whether he could understand her and whether he would laugh at her.

Thus, they were two straight lines never being crossed.

6.

Parallel lines could not be crossed, but they were real people, not real lines. They could think, and they could move. Sometimes things happened without sign.

They happened to meet on a special occasion.

It was a Sunday morning, and Chyi decided to go shopping in a big mall. When she was wandering around the hallway, she heard piano music coming from a shop. She was quite familiar with the music: "Comptine d'un autre ete: l'apres-midi." She was compelled to enter this store. There were many pianos displayed in this store. Someone was playing the piano. The music sounded elegant and sorrowful as if someone was trying to tell a story, an endearing and sad story.

Chyi went toward him. She recognized him, and he saw her. There he was, Tom. They never talked, but they felt excited in a special environment. It looked like that they were telling people that they knew each other.

Naturally, they started to talk.

"Why are you here?" Chyi was smiling.

"Working?" Tom stood up, and his face blushed with red.

"I love this music …from the movie *Amelie*." Chyi combed her straight long black hair with her small hand, looking at him with her black and bright eyes.

"Yeah, I watched that movie, too." Tom moved a chair for Chyi.

"I tried to play it, but it was hard." She sat on the chair and used her small fingers to touch the keyboard.

"Yeah, I have been practicing for several weeks." Tom sat down and smiled at Chyi, and he caught a sight at her with his deep-water eyes.

"Could you teach me?" Chyi looked at his music sheet and asked naturally.

"Yeah…" Tom did not look at her, but he seemed a little bit embarrassed.

At last, Chyi found the chance to know him, to know a silent boy that she was

eager to know.

7.

From then on, they always stayed together in the practice room. Tom taught Chyi to play piano. Sometimes she asked him questions about the sheet. He did not have a lot of words but showed her patiently.

Little by little, Chyi knew Tom's story. She even understood why Tom wore wigs, although Tom did not mention that. However, Chyi still did not let Tom know her story, because she was afraid of something. Something might drag her to leave him and to lose him forever. She was not courageous enough to tell him the truth. Tom respected Chyi; he never urged her to tell him about her.

The practice room was quite small, which can only contain two or three people. The black piano stood against the wall. A long bench was set in front of the piano, and behind it was standing another small chair. When playing piano, one would sit on the bench with his back toward the door. There were no windows in this room, which made the room quite private. Chyi liked to sit behind him and watch him playing piano. One day, she, like before, pinned herself on the chair, trying to pay attention to his work, but she could not concentrate. She was staring at him, his straight back, his curly golden wig, his thin and long hands. His legs were so long that they could not pose themselves right under the piano. His cotton pants were a little bit short that she could see his black socks. His black Tommy cloth shoes were neat and decent. He felt that she was observing him, so he turned around to look at her and gave her a gentle smile.

He taught her a piece and wanted her to show him. He turned the sheet and sat beside her. She was trying, but she hit the wrong keys. She knew she could not be right on, and she did not know the reason. She was quite embarrassed, and she looked at him. Tom was smiling. He used his thin and slim fingers and pulled her fingers to the right key. His fingers were beautiful, soft and tender as if he was touching a small baby. Chyi's face suddenly blushed with red. Her heart was beating fast. She dared not to see him. She could feel his skinny and thin fingers were a little bit cool and wet. He felt what Chyi felt. He put his hand back, lowering his head, pretending to look at the music sheet. His face was red like Chyi's. He said nothing and turned around, and looked at her. His deep-water eyes said nothing, but Chyi could feel him.

Then, he turned back suddenly and said, "Chyi, thank you."

"Why?" Chyi was wondering.

"You make me feel that I am important." Tom kept his eyes looking at the front of the room.

"Well …" Chyi felt happy when hearing his words. "Thank you too."

Tom turned, and he gazed at some place as if he was thinking about something. "Why?"

"Because you help me find myself back…" Chyi did not continue, and she seemed to hide herself. She was conflicted.

That was Tom. He respected her and never urged her. Chyi touched his curly hair with her small fingers. Tom was frozen and silent.

8.

The power of love could change a person.

Tom never knew that he could change himself for someone.

There he changed. He took off his wigs. He shaved his side hair and cut his black hair short and neat. He looked handsome, energetic and healthy. It was the first time that Chyi saw his real hair. In fact, his own hair was beautiful. Although his eyes could not say anything, Chyi indeed felt him, his honest and pure soul, which was like the refreshing and clean water flowing down to the desert to Chyi's heart.

She wrote a poem for Tom and gave it to him:

My friend
You are the water
Soft and tender
As the silk
Touching my soul
Silent and gentle

However, the more she loved him, the more she felt guilty. She was so conflicted. She persuaded herself to tell him the truth, but she was worried about something. Could Tom, a beautiful and young soul, accept such a miserable and complicated girl? Would he understand her? Yes, he would, but he might subconsciously hate her for not telling him earlier. Tom was young, and it would be difficult for him to bear the burden of her worse story on his shoulder. Tom might be crazy and might be depressed again. She felt that she was selfish. She hated herself.

She loved him so deeply. She was afraid of hurting him, and she would not like to see him depressed, but she had already hurt him.

What should she do? She hid herself in her room, crying. She drove to the beach at night, shouting at the deep and dark sea. Why was she different from the other girls? Why did she suffer like that? What did she do to deserve to be tortured like that? Such a young and decent soul had been tortured like that? She cried out at the dark sky, "Tom, Tom, Tom..."

Her tears were flowing down from her face, but nobody could see her and her voice was devoured by the loud and billowy sound of the surge of the sea. Her white dress was wet; her long and straight hair was crazily dancing with the wind.
She was standing there, like a small white bird standing on the riffle, frozen ...

9.

Several days later, Tom received a letter from Chyi:

Tom,

I don't care that your eyes cannot say anything. I know that you want to say something from your eyes, but they were not able to express your feelings. You have no choice, but I don't care. Even if you are blind as a blowing wind, I still love you.

But, Tom, I should go. I am not the good girl worthy to be loved by

a beautiful boy. I hide myself from you because I have no enough courage to tell you the truth. Tom, I have already been married. I am a runaway wife. My husband beat me and tortured me. I could not stand him, so I escaped.

I am young, but I suffered too much, which makes me feel unconfident. I cannot be like the other girls, living the way that they like, loving the one whom they love.

Tom, good Tom. Forgive me for not telling you earlier, because I am afraid of losing you, because I love you so deeply.

Tom, I cannot love you, but I love you.
Do not hate me, Tom. Remember what we had before. And forget me from then on, and it will be good for you.

Bye, Tom.

Yours
Chyi

10.

Chyi was gone. She never said good-bye to Tom, gone with the wind without any trails. Tom did not believe it. He could not accept it. He stubbornly kept waiting for her in the practice room from morning to afternoon, from afternoon to evening, but Chyi did not show up.

One year and two year, winter came and came another winter. Chyi still did not show up.

From then on, Tom became more silent.

Again, he put his wigs on, that dark black hair or that golden curly hair, covering his real handsome short black hair.

Blues Guitar in Red

Color Photograph

Luciana Carneiro

Gretel

Chris Bruchette

Gretel remembered the witch, snarling mouth and sharp claws, but it was the house she remembered the most, the House of Confection. The mere fact that she could eat anything (the pictures on the wall, the spoons in the kitchen) *amazed* her. Hansel had been weary, at first, but then hunger controlled and sugar was plenty.

Outside the church, a crowd of people gathered, lamenting or rejoicing, or both. Death was abundant and only certain officials had proper funerals. Hansel was now dead, sixty years after the witch's home had melted away, sixty years to the date. Both had marked the day in their minds.

Hansel, longing to forget his birth but never forgetting the witch, had become a Bishop. Power bought by the witch's jewels and gold. Gretel, twice-married and twice a widow, had done well for herself; both her husbands were of noble birth and each one richer than the monarch.

They were twins. Their mother died in the throes of childbirth, naming her twins before she passed on. Their father, a woodsman, a farmer, and slave to a manor, had married quickly, scared of two children with hungry mouths and eager fingers; of course, their stepmother was cold, as were all stepmothers.

Hansel the Great or Hansel the Wicked, depending on your politics, never told his story, never let anyone know of the horrors endured by the witch. "Never," he had whispered to Gretel days after escaping. Only their father knew.

The church incense mixed with the smells of a hot summer and the stench clouded Gretel's mind. Her thoughts ran to the day their father died, to the stench of vomit and pus and regret. It had been four years after the incident, four years of her and Hansel living life to the fullest. To their father, it had been four years of guilt, of bleeding inside from remorse. Gretel had cried knowing that he loved them, knowing that he was already in hell for allowing his second wife to banish them to the woods. Hansel, now the Cold-Hearted, looked at their father, skin and bones, veins enlarged by fever and said, "When you see the witch in hell, tell her I send my love." Their father died two hours later.

As she sat listening to the chants and prayers for her dead brother, Gretel thought about the years that they had lived, thought of her children and then thought of her role in the story, her place. She had always been second, second to be born, second to receive love, second to the witch, and now the second to die. But her being second had saved Hansel. She never told him. Never, even in their most heated arguments, that she, Gretel the Meek, almost let the witch eat him. Almost.

The service had taken longer than necessary and storm clouds had gathered, as if Hansel had ordered it from God. Gretel made her way to her gilded carriage—the best that jewels from a dead witch and two dead husbands could buy—just in time before the rain became a flood. Lightening flashed followed by the clap of thunder and somewhere someone shouted her name, and, for a moment, her thoughts went back to the house, to Hansel screaming her name from the elaborate iron cage while the witch gathered herbs in the woods.

"Just eat it Hansel, just eat the damn cage."

"Has sugar made you stupid as well as fat? I can't. It's iron." She cried because his words cut her spirit, cut to the bone, for she was fat now and her mind was fuzzy from being full and scared.

After Gretel had pushed the witch into the oven, they ran. Rain began to fall, melting the sugared house while the witch, still trapped, screamed.

In the carriage Gretel pulled the black book from the many folds of funeral garb.

It was a simple book on the outside, no writing, just black leather. Several days after they had escaped they both returned to the witches' house. Hansel had to see if she really was dead, Gretel needed to see if the sweet house with its sweet taste was really gone. And both had been curious, both needed to see if it was a dream-mare, fueled by hunger. Neither would know that their return would reward them with riches abundant in gold and jewels. Yet more importantly than the desire to know the outcome they needed desperately to know if the ending was really happily ever after. Hansel had found the wooden chest full of gold and jewels of every color and shape. Gretel had found something too, in what was left of the kitchen. She had found the witches cook book. Her grimoire. She never told Hansel what she had found.

Gretel turned to the page on gingerbread houses. The recipe was simple. Now that Hansel was gone, she thought about making her own house, a house of confection, and smiled.

Fireflies

Hai Dang

I remember when I was 10, and we would run out into the field behind my house. On cool mid-summer nights, trying to see how many fireflies we could catch before bedtime. And I remember how their light would dance across your grinning face.

I remember when I was 16, and I asked you out for the first time. I remember how I almost threw up on your shoes once and mine twice. We had iced chai lattes that night like we always did. 2%, with whip cream and cinnamon, but no nutmeg. God help Tad if he put nutmeg on it again. I remember how the light from the neon sign made your smile brighter.

I remember when I was 22, and I asked you to marry me. I hid the ring in a shrimp shell in your pasta that night. You found it and were about to make fun of me like always for somehow leaving at least one shell in the pasta. But when you looked at it and realize what I was asking, you said yes, and the glow from the candlelight danced across your smiling face.

I remember when I was 28, and you told me that you cared for me. But you didn't love me anymore; I remember the street light shining as you try to force a smile across your face.

I went to visit my mother last weekend and went for a walk after dinner. The fireflies were out and about; I began trying to catch as many as I could. But I stopped when I looked behind me and saw that their light was dancing across an empty space. And I remembered that somewhere a light was dancing across your smiling face for someone else.

light
Silver Geletin Print
Jennifer Henderson

For Better or For Worse

Erin Christian

It wriggled about under the confines of my seatbelt, yanking at the hem of my dress. It was one of those frilly numbers, with a layer of solid reddish brown underneath a sheer mottled print, which never seemed to want to stay aligned. All of my squirming, combined with breeze from the windows due to the car's lack of AC, caused my sweaty nest of hair to escape from its bun. My feet were aching hostages in two clunky brown heels against the gray floorboard, and my ankles remained limp for a few precious moments before they would have to support my body on those heinous inventions of man. My dress seemed to have declared mutiny, because the more I tugged and picked at it, the more spitefully twisted it became.

"Shit…shitshitshit." In the midst of my struggle, a notch in my little silver bracelet caught on a loose strand in the bottom hem. With the intensity and frustration of a convict picking a lock, I hunched over and fidgeted with the trapped jewelry.

"You know Julia, you didn't have to come today," Alan said as he took his green eyes off the traffic and allowed them to smile warmly over at me. "You're not obligated like family or anything…"

I grinned as I freed my bracelet with a crisp snap, "Not yet, and maybe not ever if my dress unravels in front of your whole family."

I had never seen Alan look so sharp in our entire three years together; with his usual reddish-brown stubble clean-shaven, his hair actually trimmed, and a neatly pressed tuxedo hugging his slender frame, he reminded me of a tap dancer in a Fred Astaire film. We had started the day fresh and pristine images of classy youth, with not a hair out of place, and only my awkward stride in alien heels and Alan's occasional tugging at his tie betrayed any hint that we weren't aristocratic socialites off to yet another night at the opera. Well that and our arrival behind the Our Lady Full of Grace Catholic church in a two-seater red Civic, missing three hubcaps and some paint near the trunk, windows down and Zeppelin's "Black Dog" roaring into the open air.

The small parking lot was packed, and I combed my hair back into submission with my fingers as we slid into a space near the alley in the far back. At the death of the sputtering engine, I turned wide-eyed to the back door of the church. I couldn't, for the life of me, figure out what the hell I was doing there.

"It's ok, we're not late. It's only 12:30, so we've still got a whole half-hour." Alan reassuringly pressed my hand into his.

"There isn't any chance we could spend that half-hour out here, and then sneak in just as the ceremony starts, is there? I've waited this long to meet the rest of your family. I'm sure they won't mind waiting a little longer." I said while unbuckling my seatbelt. With one hand on the door handle, I glanced back at Alan and, when I saw his brows furrowed in concern, I began to giggle.

"Oh my God, I am just kidding, Alan! C'mon, let's get this over with."

Our shoes crunched and slid across the white gravel; I walked in exaggerated stork-like steps, and Alan hid a smile. We had started dating young, at 17 in fact, and we learned that we would most likely not be taken seriously because of that. I was paranoid

that Alan's dad only invited me to the wedding to be polite and, possibly because of that, I was terrified that I wouldn't make a good impression, that the family wouldn't like me.

When we walked through the smooth oak doors to the back of the church, I caught my breath at the wall of people blocking our path. We wedged ourselves into the room, closing the door behind us, and I immediately felt the heat from all of the bodies pressed close together.

"Heellooo! Oh jeez, Will, your son is here! Why look at you, Alan! The last time I saw you, you were a tiny thing covered in pickle juice on your father's kitchen floor! Your uncle Ted will be so glad you've come today!" A red flush crept up Alan's throat and devoured some of his freckles as a rotund woman in a brilliant blue rhinestone dress enveloped him into her.

The woman winked an eye encrusted with midnight blue eye shadow at me and said with a twitter, "Don't ask about the pickle juice dear, it's a terribly long story!" With a squeal, and without even pausing to be introduced to me, the formidable woman bounded over to her next victim. Alan, I reminded myself, I was there for Alan.

"That's my aunt Edith. We never see her since she lives in Maine and hates Tennessee. Thank God," Alan whispered. To get my bearings, I scanned the room we had entered where everyone was gathered before being ushered to their seats in the chapel. The carpet seemed like it was once burgundy, but it had become faded and flattened by the pounding of feet attending countless weddings and funerals; I had serious doubts over whether this room was used during regular masses. The ivory walls would have been barren had they not been appointed the duty of hosting the most garish brass sconces with the most obviously fake candles that I had ever seen. In my humble opinion, I mean I'm no decorator or anything, they were better off vacant and plain rather than just tacky. Fake flower arrangements, each with a layer of dust as light as snow, sat forsaken on small wooden tables astride pictures of nameless saints and pamphlets about youth group summer camps. If there was anything else notable about the room, it was lost to me in the masses that had gathered for the wedding.

Alan and I stood on the fringe of the crowd, watching the fluctuations that gave the group before us the appearance of a unified organism in the face of which cookies and finger sandwiches stood no chance. I tried my best to ignore the alternating roars and murmurs of the herd while I bounced on my tip toes like a wind-up toy. Alan, who had been trying to keep hold of my hand, along with his suave composure, hissed at me to stop.

"What on earth are you doing? It isn't time to dance yet, y'know."

"I only know three people here. Three. Your mom, your dad, and your grandmother, and I want to find them. I hate standing here like a couple of wallflowers around people I don't know," I said.

Alan rolled his eyes, and I kept on bopping and weaving in vain when I thought I recognized a familiar face. After several minutes of my new dance, I finally spotted Alan's parents.

"There they are! Can we go over to say hi to your mom?"

"Yeah, I don't really know many of these people, so there's no point in trying to mingle. I'll just be told a thousand times how cute I was then with looks that say how

disappointing I am now," Alan replied with a smirk.

I gripped his hand, and we began to weave through the thick crowd. I held my breath once we were submerged in the sea of bodies, only to let it out in little burning puffs each time I had to mutter "Sorry" or "'scuse me" at an indecent brush or abrupt bump. Few even took note of our passage, only those who once knew Alan as a child, or who felt that it was vital that Alan know that they once knew his uncle, spared a moment to speak to him. Never once was I addressed; my spirits began to sink, and I started to lag behind Alan and let him pull me along through the irreverent herd. However, before I lost all hope, I caught again the beaming green eyes of Alan's mother, next to the gray hair of his father, and gave her a wave. The press of the crowd forced the four of us practically toe to toe, and the scent of Mrs. Schup's lavender perfume stung my nostrils.

"Julia! It's so great you see you again!"

Mrs. Schup was always so enthusiastic, and I sighed from relief when she gave me an eager hug. As I made small talk with Alan's mother, Alan shook his father's hand and gave him a brief update on his life since the last time we saw them. Our pleasantries were interrupted by sudden silence and the migrating of the herd into the main chapel. While I had never even met neither Alan's uncle John nor his soon to be wife, I had heard stories. Apparently, his future wife was also his last one; they were married years ago, had a rocky go of it, divorced, and were now getting back together for what was rumored in Alan's family doomed to be another rocky go of it.

"Are you *sure* I should be up there with you? Like you said earlier...I'm not *really* family," I whispered as we navigated our way to the third pew from the front. All I got for a response from Alan was a bone crushing grip and an impish smile as he tugged me along by the hand. As we passed through the rows, I gazed through the pews that were beginning to fill and gulped down my resentment for the sea of eyes that seemed to be asking in a resounding chorus who I was.

Alan and I settled into the middle of the third pew, between beloved aunt Edith and her prepubescent son William. Edith's face lit up when she saw Alan, and she made her son scoot to make room so that Alan could sit next to her. Much to my delight, that arrangement placed me next to young William. Every 30 seconds, William felt it absolutely necessary to let a honking snort, or a wet and gooey gurgle, escape from his crusty nose. Also, between his charming snorts and gurgles, he seemed to deem it necessary to allow his red-rimmed rheumy blue eyes to peruse unmentionable regions of my dress. I had just finished finding a comfortable spot on the wooden seat when I felt a soft brush against my knee. I glanced to my left to see William hunched over and grinning at me.

"Sorry, I was just reaching over here to grab this hymnal. I used to sing in church y'know," he said.

"Uh huh."

"I was an altar boy too, until last year"

"Greeaat…"

William eased back into his seat, and I felt his hand graze my knee again. Desperate for escape, I looked to Alan on my right and inched a little toward him, but he'd become entwined in conversation with aunt Edith. In order to avoid William's focus on

me, I scooted over as close to Alan as I could and became suddenly interested in the church décor.

The decorations weren't spectacular. There where white flower bouquets erupting out of the edge of every 4th pew and some fancy white streamers around the altar, which the church itself would have been much prettier without, and my bare arms were covered in chill bumps from the arctic air conditioning. Even though the actual chapel was small and intimate, it had high arching ceilings that reminded me of the inside of a cathedral, and hanging along the walls were statues depicting various scenes from the life of Jesus. These statues stood vigil over the smattering of about 80 people throughout the church, and the one that loomed over our pew was that of Jesus being taken down from the cross.

The ceremony itself was short and sweet, quite literally, and only the three teenaged children of the couple were in the wedding party: two young and shiny blonde girls grinning like mad in bright pink taffeta and a somber older blonde boy who periodically fiddled with his bow tie. This was my first glimpse at Alan's uncle John. After hearing all of the various stories that circulated through the family like a pestilence about him, I found him to be surprisingly handsome.

The mysterious uncle John stood erect and beaming throughout the ceremony, his sandy blonde hair illuminated by the light pouring in through the few windows that weren't stained glass, and his angular face grinning. I didn't see the delinquent black sheep of a family, but simply a loving father with three beautiful, yet awkward, children supporting him. His wife Sara, whose name I still did not learn until later, apparently cleaned up well. Her image as the uneducated barefoot and pregnant young girl prior to her first wedding to John, painted by some in Alan's family, fell far short of appealing. However, on this second wedding day, her light brown hair was braided and held up a delicate veil that shimmered around her ageless face, and I could not imagine the woman standing before us ever stepping foot inside a trailer. She had to have been at least forty, judging by the appearances of her children, but she looked no more than thirty-three. As I watched them say their "I Dos" in their second go round newlywed bliss, I felt a pang of something like sympathy for the wife. Maybe she once felt as awkward and out of place as I; maybe she still did.

Right after the kiss, the wedding party departed from the altar to yet another section of the church, and soon enough Alan and I were caught up in the noisy migrating herd again. Initially, I thought that the church was composed of the small cramped room we started off in and the chapel, but much to my surprise there was also a large kitchen and dining area hidden off to the side. The kitchen itself was separated from the vast dining area by a wall with a moderately sized slit to pass food through. Due to the bright yellow flowered '70s wallpaper and puke green stove, I thought this separation was a wise choice. But oh, how different the vast dining area was. The walls were a rich ivory, mounted in an even pattern with golden sconces holding light bulbs that flickered like real candles, and the lush green carpet looked as if it had never seen the bottom of a human foot. As we filed in I gaped at the five tables lining one of the walls: all elegantly decked with white tablecloths that supported mounds of finger sandwiches, little chicken wings, vegetable and fruit platters, deli meat platters adorned with a variety of colorful cheeses, and an entire table devoted to desserts arranged on

tiered silver serving trays; I could smell warm brownies as soon as we wandered in.

"Alan, look!" I said as I grabbed his elbow. "Look at those éclairs! Oh! And the brownies!"

Alan began to laugh and he stuck his tongue out a little between his teeth in a playful smile,

"You should probably calm down and eat some *real food* first," he said.

"I see nothing fake about those freaking éclairs, but those little chicken wings look decent too I guess…"

"Hah, leave it to chocolate to make you more comfortable."

"I'd hardly call myself comfortable right now, but chocolate never hurts," I replied. "Now hurry up before the herd devours everything."

I blushed hot and cleared my throat when I realized I had said "the herd" aloud, and Alan shot me a sideways glace.

"Before the *what* devours everything?"

"Uh, I meant that as a joke, I really did. Alan, I am so sorry I referred to your family—"

I attempted to stammer out an apology, but Alan just roared in laughter and we practically sprinted hand in hand through the empty tables to the banquet. We entered the back of the line, right behind Alan's grandparents, and held our empty plates in a very Oliver Twist fashion as the procession inched forward. So far I had succeeded in managing to stay in my comfort zone regarding the relatives and, while I had met his grandmother before, my uncertainty as to how that first meeting went over left me feeling insecure and small standing there with my little plastic plate. What if she remembered the ballerina figurine whose pointed toe I severed forever? Echoes of her screech when she saw me holding the crippled dancer permeated my thoughts. *Oh God,* I thought, *the super glue we used to fix it might not have held! What if the toe popped back off?* I immediately became certain that, should his grandmother turn around to talk to me, my heart would burst out of my chest and into the wavy mound of gray hair atop her unsuspecting head. Her muted silver dress stiffly turned when she caught sight of Alan, and my heart jumped a hurdle.

"Alan, you look so handsome. I'm *truly* glad you could come. And Julia, it's delightful to see you again," she said.

"It's great seeing you too, Mrs. Schup."

"Please, call me Anne. You know, Julia, it's wonderful that you came today so that you can meet more of the family." And then she said with a more relaxed and sly smile, "You may become a part of this crazy bunch one of these days."

"Oh, well...ummm... thank you, Mrs. Schup..."

Aunt Edith touched her elbow and drew her attention to the vegetable platter we were approaching, and I withered under Alan's gushing gaze. Once our clear plastic plates were laden with the finger foods, and a bit of chocolate here and there, we found an empty table off to the side to sit at since Alan's grandparents drifted over to the table with the bride and groom.

"Are you ok with sitting over here?" I asked with a hand to my face to mask my mouthful of sliced ham. "We could go find your parents and sit with them if you want to be with family."

"Naw, I'm fine. See them over there?" Alan pointed to the opposite side of the room, "My parents are at that table with the bride and groom and their kids. We'd have to make more small chatter than should be humanly possible. I'd much rather sit here with you and actually talk."

I gave Alan's hand a squeeze and watched the tables fill with the nameless faces. Waiters and waitresses in black and white tuxedos with golden name tags bustled through the crowd to serve drinks, and I felt rather fancy getting my sweet tea dutifully refilled every 5 minutes. The tables all had white tablecloths, little tea lights quivering like virgin brides, and little single white rose and baby's breath centerpieces in clear glass vases, topped with a freakishly happy plastic bride and groom.

Each time I glanced at my plate, I was surprised to see how my mound of food was shrinking considering my mood. I wasn't even registering what I ate; like an automaton, I devoured what lay before me. The chicken wings might as well have been the moist deli meats, and the sharp cheddar tasted no different than the little éclairs. However, once I saw Alan's aunt Edith bounding her way to our table, blue rhinestones glittering, bitter bile rose up behind my last plump éclair.

"Oh God Alan, here *she* comes…"

"Alan!" Edith screeched, "You two look so alone! No worries, William and I will keep you company. William! Won't you hurry it up?"

Edith plopped down in the seat to my right, the unfortunate rhinestones to the rear of her dress crunching against the hard plastic chair, and William sat down across from me with a whisper as his suit jacket grazed the edge of the table. As Edith prattled on with her questions regarding Alan's schooling, boasting of William's success in soccer, and gushing over her love of cats, I found it difficult not to stare at the thick blue eye shadow that was globbing up at the corners of her eyes; it was hypnotizing. I allowed myself to run on autopilot, answering appropriately when addressed but not investing in the discussion, and I daydreamed about my plans with Alan later that weekend.

Yet before my mental escape could get me very far, I was startled out of a lakeside picnic lunch by a sharp kick to my ankle. I looked around with a glare to see William beaming at me, and I felt his rough shoe scraping up my shin. He seemed to notice that, whatever he was trying to do, he was doing it wrong, and his face became all stoic concentration. I stared incredulously as I felt his feet fumbling around my ankles, trying to either bruise me or initiate a game of footsie. Snatching my legs away, I sent a fierce glower from underneath my furrowed eyebrows and backed my chair up a few inches to place myself out of his reach.

Before I knew it, the dining area became cleared of food as the servers took uneaten leftovers away and calls rang out for group pictures with the bride's family. An empty table was cleared of all plates and silverware, candles, and happy flower arrangements and then moved to clear a space in front of the wall for photos. The herd shifted, undulated, chattered, and settled in front of the happy family of the bride; I couldn't help but think of what a sequel that must have been for them. The photographer, who I believe was a cousin of someone's, flashed that poor group of people like a camera zealot, crying with ecstasy, "Just *one more* folks! That was beautiful! We wanna remember this *forever*, don't we? Then I promise this time, just *one more*!"

The flash reflected off the faces of the bride and groom's shiny daughters one too many times, and I began to see black dots swimming before me. The somber blonde son of uncle John seemed to be suffering as well because, when the torrent of flashes was all over, he ambled to the back of the crowd and faded away. The herd shifted again, and I gripped Alan's arm to avoid being lost in the stampede. A roar of murmurs dissolved any individual voices into a twittering chorus over how beautiful the bride's dress was, and how darling the bridesmaids were, and I broke into a sweat.

I knew that the picture assault for the groom's family was going to come up next and, to save Alan's family the awkwardness of telling me I couldn't be in the photo, I told Alan I was going for another éclair plate and escaped into the crowd. As the table with desserts loomed larger in my horizon of bobbing heads, I could hear the photo zealot calling Alan's family to come to attention in front of his shutter click assault weapon. I kept my head down and face concealed behind my unraveling hair and attempted to look engrossed in the éclair pyramid I built onto my plate.

The murmuring of the crowd lulled me in my éclair orgy, but I began to fidget when I realized that I hadn't heard the camera snap its first blinding photo. I froze at the dessert table, with sugary cream and chocolaty dough bounding about on my tongue, until I heard what sounded like a secret message float through the mob. It started off as a soft sigh from the photo area and grew into an echoing call of "Julia? Who's Julia? Where's Julia?" I hesitated, still demolishing my pyramid of pastry, until a lady standing beside me tapped my shoulder and asked if I was the Julia everyone was looking for. I ate my last éclair and sheepishly put my plate down on a nearby table.

"I…I'm Julia." The woman who tapped me merely pointed toward the cluster of Alan's family waiting for their picture. I snatched a napkin from the table next to my bursting plate of sweating pastries and shoved it up to my mouth while checking my hands and dress for carnage. It seemed as if all of the blood in my entire body rushed to my face in that moment, and I shuffled my way back through the crowd. As I passed, I asked, "Me? Are they sure they want me? Julia, right?" and I was answered by consistent affirmatives, warm smiles, and kind nods that I didn't remember noticing before; my throat stung with shame each time I remembered referring to these people as "the herd."

When I reached the front of the mass, I saw Alan standing with green eyes glowing and one arm held out waiting to fit me under it. I turned my head and glanced at the photo zealot, who only smiled with pleading eyes for me to cooperate and nodded me forward into Alan's arm. Standing there, waiting for the photographer to finish adjusting his frame to add me in, I whispered to Alan.

"Are you sure I am supposed to be here? I went back there so you guys could take your family picture."

"You're supposed to be here."

"Are you sure?" I asked again. This time Alan only placed his hand against the small of my back as his grandmother chimed in.

"We were waiting for you," Mrs. Schup said.

The camera flashed and, with the sharp clack of the shutter, the black swimming dots returned to my eyes and blotted out everything save the warmth I could feel in the press of Alan's hand.

Day One (Stuck in a Box Series)

Colored Pencil

Mia Montgomery

Day Two (Stuck in a Box Series)

Colored Pencil

Mia Montgomery

Day Three (Stuck in a Box Series)

Colored Pencil

Mia Montgomery

First to Burn, Then to Freeze

Stephanie Roberts

I can't get any lower than this.

Lying on the ground in cold defeat, Quentin Miller stared at a wad of gray gum that melded unnaturally with the brown blades of grass peeking through the concrete. He was dizzy from the fall. He knew he couldn't move too quickly. The blood would surge to his throbbing head and make it worse. The dull lights from the street lamps didn't help. Neither did the maniacal laugh in front of him. He felt like he was at a carnival, passed out from one too many rides or freakish side shows. He felt his father's torn jacket in his hands. The frays of the patches were soft beneath his fingertips. The worn threads brought back his father's memory. Before he could brush his unruly brown hair from his eyes and get up to stare down the laughter, a Dunkin Donuts wrapper slapped his red, wind-broken face.

What in the hell? Never in my wildest dreams. Never. In. My. Wildest. Dreams. Bribing teethless men with dimes and fighting with old pieces of shit in the cold. Now a crusty donut wrapper. Well, maybe I can do something with this.

*

Boston's frosty streets forced Quentin to be a trash leech. On his walks from the Mullen Shelter for his daily grub to his makeshift abode on Woodward, he kept his milky blue eyes peeled for any scrap he could take back and make his own. He wasn't one to rummage through the barrels on the roadside or wait behind third-rate delis for leftover rancid roast beef and rye bread crusted in mold. When he was twelve, his father once told him, "You gotta hold you head higher than the rest of them losers. You gotta. Gotta fake it 'til you make it. Otherwise you'll feel like you one of them. Then you'll be your old man. Who wants that?"

When Quentin became a part of the Woodward community, he resolved to have more self-respect than his fellow tramps and panhandlers with their begging bags and squeaky shopping carts. Instead, he'd casually pick up trash he deemed useful, walk towards an available barrel, often in the Common—looking as though he were a good citizen discarding the abandoned litter—and then tuck it away in his Primatic Dental laptop bag. Empty water bottles coated in films of grease made fine candles holders. Used Styrofoam cups served as ashtrays for his occasional cigarette smoking. Endless scraps of cardboard and aluminum foil reinforced and insulated his hovel. He was an innovator of litter, making one man's trash his treasure.

When October came and Woodward Street turned colder than what was bearable, his hoarding went into full force. Elastics. Plastic bags. Broken beer bottles. Flyers crushed by the soles of men's shoes. Everything his eyes spied was necessary, even if he didn't have room in his prized 47 cubic feet Coldtech refrigerator box, lined with tinfoil and packaging tape, retrofitted for his comfort and extra security. Duct tape and garbage bags decorated the front. When he first built this hovel, he weatherproofed the outside with as much tape and mismatched bags he could get his hands on. And every

night, when he returned home in the late hours, with his discovered goods in tow, he'd sit Indian style, crossing his already cramped legs, search for his matches to light his candles, and lay out the day's finds.

He prided himself for not being like the rest of those sketchy figures, stuffing garbage into carts like the starving misers that he thought they were. His father taught him better. One by one, he'd place the bent plastic utensils, the discarded inks pens, abandoned issues of the *Boston Globe* in a straight formation, ready for examination. He would take his alcohol wipes from the health clinic to sterilize the forks and knives that narrowly missed the trash cans. He would scrub until the grime of dried spaghetti sauce disappeared. He would unscrew the caps of the pens, remove the springs and ink inserts, and sterilize to have straws for his morning coffee. He would take the paper to pad his bed, lying on images of Mit Romney in crisis or the Sox losing to the Yankees—again. Every night for six years, this was his way of life.

One evening that October, he returned to what he playfully considered *Chez Miller*, in all its cardboard and tinfoil glory. Before he could begin his evening ritual, he went into a panic. *Where's it?* As tiny as his place was, he kept everything in particular spot. *I never take it out.* His eyes darted all over, from top to bottom and left to right of the cardboard shack. *It's not cold enough.* Beads of perspiration formed. *I'd wait 'til mid November when I can't feel my feet.* Heart raced. *Or when the snow hits.* He felt a numbness overwhelm his body. *Why isn't it here?* A cold, still numbness that quickly dissolved into a sick sensation until the heat of his apprehension surfaced. *Wait.* His toes first felt a tingle that stalked up his legs. *That stack wasn't there.* It made its way to his stomach, then his head. *No. No. No.* The room tilted. *It was ova' there. With my pens.* It could have been from the shock of violation or the sheen from streetlights on the tinfoil. *And my bags.* The one item he salvaged from his former home, his former life, what were both now ashes, was missing. *No sir. No.*

Some lousy skidder's been in my place. Touching my stuff. Moving my stuff. Wearing my stuff. Who do these rats think they are?

He had made sure to hide his father's military jacket under the stack of July's papers in the far right corner. It was his pillow. It was his blanket. It was his reminder of his fatal mistake.

He inherited that ratty prize when he was twelve and careless, smoking a cigarette, his act of defiance. After Dad lost his piss-poor job, the Millers moved out of their apartment and into their '87 rusty red Chevrolet. There were no breaks for any of them. His mom made enough at Roscoe's Diner to keep gas in the car and food in their mouths. There was never enough room for all three of them at the different shelters they would float from daily. They could never stay longer than for a night and a meal. When the copper banged his flashlight against the driver's window to wake them for the fourth time in three weeks and tell them about their vagrancy, Quentin's dad scouted for places to live, rent-free and hassle-free from men dressed in blue.

"Come on, Quentin."

His father's shrill whistle got his attention. Quentin dropped the red straw he used to prod the ants devouring a glazed donut in the Stop N' Shop parking lot and ran to his father.

"Dad, they looked like sprinkles. I want a donut. Can we get donuts?"

"What? Come on. We gotta go."

"The ants were attacking the donut. You know what would be funnier? Sprinkles attacking the donuts they were on. That'd be awesome. They'd be destroyers." Quentin's grin grew wide until his dimples formed—just like his father's.

"Son, your mom gets off from work in about two hours. We need to find this place. I wanna see there's any space for us. We can't live in this damn car anymore. We're not living in the Common. Your mom made that suggestion. Ha!"

His father's search took them to the old Combat Zone, the tacky red light district, glamorous for the Sixties, pathetic, dirty, and scandal free for the nineties. As they drove through the abandoned neighborhood, through the passenger window, Quentin saw men pushing carriages filled with soda cans and faded posters on brick buildings advertising the Two O'clock Club. The one poster that caught his eye featured Busty Russell. His eyes clung onto her statuesque image until his father turned the Chevrolet around the corner and Busty disappeared. Three blocks later his family took residency in a nameless, faceless warehouse. There his father began to set up house, beginning with the mattress found behind an apartment dumpster that night.

"Quentin, get me that box with the tape and wires."

When he brought the broken toolbox over to his father, he watched him disinfect and cover the exposed metal springs.

"You gotta be resourceful, son. Living out here. You can't depend on anyone but yourself when you get out there by yourself. Remember that, Quentin. You gotta do that much for yourself."

While his father spoke, Quentin's eyes drifted to his mother as she unpacked her four chipped porcelain cups, the sterilized utensils, the Styrofoam cups his father prepared for them. Her light brown hair fell out of her bun and covered her weary hazel eyes. She was still wearing her Roscoe's Diner apron, stained with spaghetti sauce and mustard. She brought her wore hands to her forehead and massaged her headache.

"Quentin. Are you paying attention 'cause you need to. Hand me those blankets."

Three months after moving into that warehouse, settling in and trying to make the cold concrete feel like home, Quentin discovered three cigarettes, delicately cradled in the red and white Marlboro package. He assumed it to be tossed by a philandering husband with his belt mislooped and shirt casually tucked or by a hooker with neon green eye shadow and two missing teeth. The young boy slipped the package into his plastic bag and rushed home for beans and whatever canned goods his mother could sneak from the diner.

Later that night, when the cold wind sneaked under the door, his dad placed his jacket on Quentin's shoulders to keep him warm before finally heading to bed.

"Son, you coming? It's getting late. We gotta go and look for supplies."

"Dad? I wanna stay up longer. Lemme read. I'm almost finished this comic."

"Quentin. What about the candles? What if you forget to blow them out? You know how your mom gets when the candles are still on when she goes to bed."

"Dad. Trust me. I promise. I'll blow 'em out before I sleep."

With a sigh, his father said, "Ok. Try not to stay up too late."

The one thing his parents feared was fire. They couldn't afford the luxury of a smoke detector, only a fire extinguisher from the back of their abandoned jalopy.

Quentin was aware of this fear and took caution. At least he though he did. He took the candles to the far end of the warehouse, away from his parents' noses. He didn't want them to detect the cigarette fumes. He knew his father kept a lighter in his jacket. Rummaging through the left pocket, full of receipts and gum wrappers, he located the cheap red plastic tube between his fingers. His grubby thumb found a place on the lighter's flint wheel. He flicked. Nothing. Again, and nothing gave. His thumb would move (thanks to the sweat on his palm) but the wheel refused to budge. On the fifth try, a flame burst before his face. He stared at the glow, forgetting his original intentions to be an adult and puff away at what his mother considered "coffin nails." He dropped the lighter as he fumbled through his plastic bag, searching for those nails. He was unsure how to do this, how to hold the cigarette, how to breathe in the smoke and blow out puffs. He'd practiced with his breath and a dismantled pen in the colder months, inhaling slowly through the pen and pulling away to puff out failed rings. He watched his father do this smoking trick countless times.

Now was his chance to do it. Silence settled over the warehouse, save the clicks and flicks of the lighter, the rustle of the bag and the Marlboro package. Once he lit the cigarette, after several attempts, he sucked in the smoke and nicotine, only to gag. He had to stifle his coughs to avoid disturbing his parents. That grimy first taste made him desire the look and feel of the cigarette less. He tossed it aside, not realizing that it landed on a pile of construction debris, leftover from some years ago. The paint, the tarps, the newspapers ignited.

He heard a crack from behind. It was the heat from the cigarette and the debris marrying together to make fire. Before he had a chance to contain the fire, the small flames grew into larger ones, rising up to lick the ceiling and turn it black. The flames ran from one end of the warehouse to the next.

"Mom! Dad!"

Though he called their names, no words came out. He stood there and stared, watching the flames engulf his home and his family. He remembered his voice going dry, the heat bringing saline to his eyes and running. The sound of sirens, cops, fire engines, ambulances maybe, made him run with only his father's jacket and two cigarettes.

Years following the fire, Quentin drifted in and out of homeless shelters, never begging once, always under the radar, never smiling, avoiding eye contact. These were the rules. His father taught him better. First, he slept on grates to keep warm on freezing nights. Then, he discovered a goldmine collecting cans, cashing in empty Diet Coke and Budweiser cans for food vouchers at the Stop N' Shop.

Somewhere between the can hunt and the grate slumber, he stumbled into this quiet community on Woodward. They were reluctant to let him have a space to call his own. He was an outsider—silent, well kept, but miserly. And miserly worked for him. And six years later Quentin still didn't know who his neighboring vagrants were. He watched them but refused to speak to them. He knew their habits so well but never knew their names. But now he was stuck between a cardboard box and a hard place. He would have to break code, look these dirty pack rat tramps in the eye and make conver-

sation.

I've no clue. I don't know these people. I don't want to. They smell like moldy grinders. They don't bathe. They smell like fishy bastards. All these wicked gross skidders. I'd better figure it out. Can't let them get their mits on my stuff. My stuff. My jacket.

Contemplating his next move, Quentin heard the squeaks from Winnie's carriage to his left. Just as she entered her home, maneuvering her five bags of clutter, he thought,

"*Well, here goes nothing.*"

"Hey, Winnie. Need some help with that?"

With her cloudy green eyes, the elderly woman stared through him as if he were translucent. Her face broke into a wide grin, certainly comical and almost maniacal.

"Oh, sonny. Bless your heart!"

"No worries. Where ya want it?"

"Over there will do just fine. Will ya be havin' a spot of tea with me?"

The question caught him off guard. The friendly voice was foreign to his ears. No one offers anyone anything. *That accent changed. Why is she Irish all of a sudden?*

"Please say ya will? I so wish to have the company."

"Sure." *What do I've to lose? Maybe she saw one of thems guys in my place.*

Quentin sat as Winnie lit a match to the light her stolen Bunsen burner for their tea. She was a chemistry teacher decades ago until the whiskey got the better of her and her husband. They lived on Woodward for twenty years. No children. No home. But then Joseph died and Winnie was alone, collecting garbage and trading her wares for survival. Glass test tubes, petri dishes, pipettes, hotplates were the most popular items on the street. She knew her market well.

Waiting for the water filled beaker to boil, Quentin broke the awkward silence between him and his neighbor.

"So. Uh. Listen, Winnie. Did ya see anyone 'round here, I don't know, skulking about like they had no business bein' here? Because I'm missing something very, very important to me. An heirloom, ya know? It's something my father left me."

"Oh, back in Donegal, me father gave me the most precious ring. Right before he died, he did. Last summer, I took a trip with me sons to visit his grave. In Donegal. Oh, my. What a trip that was!" She slapped her knee and chuckled.

What does this have to do with anything? I wanna know where my damn jacket is and the old bat's talking about rings and graves?

"You know, sonny? I got me some of the finest jam over at the Kilmore Abbey in Connemara."

"I feel like killing something," Quentin muttered under his breath.

"Wha? Do ya know the place? The sisters there, God bless 'em, they hand grow all the fruit. Smash 'em up to make jam that melts in your mouth. Melts!"

You're gonna need them sisters and that God you're blessin' if you don't help me out.

"Oh, the old country. I miss me family there."

Before he could interrupt, the loud crackle of heat on the glass beaker interrupted Quentin's stream of thought.

"I'll getcha a cup. Then we can have our tea and talk a bit longer. I'll tell ya some more about Donegal and me father."

Winnie dug through her bag of odds and ends, finally pulling two cups with great

triumph. She then placed an expired tea bag in each cup, poured the water, and waited for it to brew. She handed a steaming cup of bitter tea to him.

"You know, there's a saying me father used to say: 'Health and a long life to you. Land without rent to you. A child every year to you. And if you can't go to heaven, may you at least die in Ireland.' Here's to ya, me boy."

He gulped the bitter brew. His throat burned to the point of numbness. His tongue couldn't feel anymore. With resignation, he said, "Well, I gotta book. I'll catch you 'round these parts." He left Winnie to further wax nostalgic of fathers and old countries. He was sure she didn't notice his hasty departure.

No.

She continued to blather to no one.

*

I'll walk 'round. Maybe I can get me mind—my mind—damn her—going. Maybe that'll do it. Maybe I did take it. No. No, that can't be. I never take it out. Well, but if I did, I wouldn't of taken it off. Lemme retrace my steps. It was there last night but not tonight. That's what I'll do. Walk backwards, remember what happened today. Anything that was out of sorts.

As he walked from Woodward back to Mullen, he saw Rory. At five foot nothing and nearly toothless, he was a man who made poverty his profession. To fool the businessmen and bleeding heart co-eds, Rory had all the signature pieces: dirty wool knit cap, stringy hair matted with dirt, faded layers of flannel and fleece, and Charlie, man's best friend in tow. The dog and that eager, helpless look in his eye sealed the deal with most people. Quentin learned this the hard way.

*

It was his second week on Woodward. It was August, and the heat from the midday sun was blinding and painful. He worked on building his cardboard home when a golden retriever panted up to him.

"Hey, buddy. Whatcha doing around these parts? You need to be in the shade. It's too hot with all that fur."

A man's voice interrupted Quentin's conversation with the canine.

"Charlie. Come here, boy. Where are ya?"

Quentin turned around to see a short, squat man with ratty hair. He had a broomstick in hand, using it to guide his way to Quentin and Charlie.

"Come here, boy. I need you. Charlie."

The way he walked in slow, jaunty steps, the way he looked off to the side made Quentin realize the man was blind.

"Hey! Your dog's here. No. Ova' here. Straight ahead. There ya go."

When the man reached Quentin, he said, "Boy, thank you for watching Charlie. He is my eyes. The name's Rory." He stuck his hand to the left of Quentin's face.

"Do ya have some change on ya? I want to get me and Charlie some water. Ya know this heat. It gets to ya. I just need a dollar."

Quentin was taken aback by his demand. But the dog's panting got increasingly harder. The sound of his heavy breaths, the look in his pitiful eyes softened his resolve.

"I've only got a dollar but I'll give it to ya because of ya dog."

Quentin reached into the pocket of his faded blue jeans and pulled out a crumpled one dollar bill. Two shiny quarters fell and hit the pavement.

He noticed Rory's eyes dart down to the ground and stare intently at the quarters.

"Here ya go. Take care, Charlie. Make sure ya get plenty to drink."

After thrusting the dollar in Rory's rough hands, Quentin walked away. When he heard the broomstick hit the ground, he turned around to see Rory crouched down picking up the abandoned quarters.

Quentin's eyes widened as he clenched both teeth and fists in anger. "I knew it! You lying midget. You were faking it and using ya dog to boot! Gimme my dollar back" he said, signaling with his left palm to give up the dollar.

"Sorry. Game over. Ya lose. Ya gotta learn the rules of this place or get out."

"But—"

"Thanks for the dollar. Me and Charlie really appreciate it."

*

With the sting of that memory still present, when Quentin saw him coming with his spare change cup, he was in no mood to deal with Rory's foolishness.

"Hey, buddy. Got some dimes on ya? Can ya help me out?"

I'm not your buddy. I got no dimes.

Although ready to discard him, Quentin stopped and realized that he had a resource at his disposal. Rory knew everything and everybody. He was as nosy as they came. In fact, it was how he weaseled money out of the poorest of the poor.

"Hey, Rory, tell me something. Did ya see anyone that may of gone in my place?"

"Well, I'd like to help ya out but my mind seems to be fading. Age, ya know." With that said, Rory began to shake his cup of coins and looked away from Quentin's penetrating stare.

"Will two dimes do ya good? Tell me whatcha know."

"I ain't seen no one 'round your business. What's it to ya?"

As Quentin dug for dimes, he said, "My dad's jacket's missing. Some bum took it."

"Waitaminute. Is it that ratty thing with the patches and the missin' buttons? The one you were wearin' this mornin'?"

"Wha—what are you yappin' about?"

"The jacket. I saw youse with it. In the Common. In the bathroom going in you're wearin' it. Then you weren't when ya left. I saws it with my own eyes." He pointed at those glazed over beads for emphasis.

"But I nev—" He stopped himself short when he realized Rory was right. He had taken the jacket with him. The sharp wind of that morning made it unbearable to walk out and over to Mullen and the Common.

"But it's gone. Someone's got it now. For a quarter, I can get ya a hint."

Quentin glared. "Who has it?"

"Can I see some shiny quarters? I'll answer yours questions soon enough."

Quentin grabbed a pocketful of changes. "Look. No more games. I'll gives ya all this change if ya give me one name."

"Perkins. Now hand them over." Those rough hands of his motioned for Quentin to hurry. Time was money for this panhandler and he didn't have much of either.

Quentin tossed the coins and headed for Perkins.

"Glad to be of service!" Rory shouted to the determined man as he picked up the shiny nickels and dimes on the pavement.

As Quentin traced his steps from taking the jacket off in that men's restroom to washing up, he caught a glance at what looked to be his father's ghost in the abandoned Stop N' Shop parking lot. The grizzly beard, the broad shoulders, the fabric of a lost jacket compelled Quentin look twice. But it wasn't him. It was Perkins, a veteran of a destitute circle of men. Quentin felt a wave of dread wash over him when he realized his mistake; he had left the jacket on the edge of the grimy men's room sink. His cloudy memory soon became clearer as he remembered the order of events. His memory took him back to this morning.

Entering the restroom.

Disrobing.

Feeling the warmth of the running water against his smoke stained skin.

Listening to other fellow men turn on the water and clean in silence.

Perkins hacking and coughing, making the noises of a choking beast in a stall.

Dressing quietly.

Leaving quietly, eyes downcast.

Perkins must have seen the jacket, lying there vulnerable and for the taking.

And take he did.

An unspoken adage governed the men Quentin knew. Every man for himself. His piece of the parking lot, his cardboard shack, his heap of junk were all left to the discretion of each man. If he proved irresponsible, such as leaving the only item from his past on a sink within eyeshot of Perkins, then it was his loss, his fault. Quentin was well aware of the rules of survival. Especially if it involved Perkins. No one took from him, even if what he had belonged to somebody else. Any man who shared a meal or cardboard space with him would know that he was among the revered. He offered protection to the men of his parking lot community. However, it only applied to men who had his trust and didn't question his authority.

But Quentin couldn't stand by and watch Perkins soil what was rightful his. The desire to reclaim his father's jacket, a piece of his now lost past, was much stronger than any rules or assumed power. He composed himself, wiping the sweat from his brow and releasing his clenched fists. He marched directly to Perkins who was making his way back to his own cardboard hovel.

"Hey. Perkins? Where'd ya get the ratty jacket?"

"It's mine. Didn't get it anywhere."

Quentin felt the blood rise to his cheeks. He knew Perkins would feign ignorance, play dumb to convince him otherwise. He needed to stay calm for the time being. To shoot accusations at him would jeopardize his chance at getting his father's jacket.

"Listen, you gotta help me out. I believe this is mine. I left it behind by mistake. Listen, I'll trade ya. I've got a carton of cigarettes back at my place. It's good quality. Unopened. I got it from the Tuesday delivery truck over at the Amoco on Stevens. Your favorite—Marlboro. You can have that as long as you hand the jacket over to me."

He was bluffing. Quite poorly, in fact. He couldn't lie to save his life. His father tried to teach him that rule but to no avail. But if he could just get his hands on that jacket. However, the bearded man didn't budge.

"'Fraid not, son."

Feeling the bitter sting of those words, Quentin reached over and grabbed the jacket's collar. "See this? It says 'David Miller.' That's my dad. This is his. Now it's mine." With that, Quentin grabbed at the left sleeve hoping to yank the old man to the ground, grab the jacket, and make a run for it.

"It's mine. Give it back now," he gritted through his teeth. He latched onto the sleeve until his fingernails dug into the fabric and his knuckles turned white.

But Perkins wouldn't give. His grip was ironclad. "No. Get away from me ya sorry ass punk," he growled and pulled harder. Quentin, refusing defeat, dug his heels into the dead grass, planting himself into the ground, hoping to be as immovable as possible.

"I'm not going anywhere without this. It's mine, you old piece of shit. Give it up!"

Perkins leaned closer to the ground, hoping to counter Quentin's weight, hoping his own bulbous body would work with gravity and take the jacket down.

"No. No. No. Youse need to get away from me. Youse know who I am?"

It looked like two dogs fighting over a dried up, meatless bone. Neither one wanted to concede defeat. With each pull, there was an even more forceful one given back. They worked themselves into exhaustion. Just when it felt like one loosened his grip, the other would yank as hard as possible, wishing it into his possession. However, the other wouldn't let go.

Perkins went closer to the ground until he started walking heavily, looking quite the caveman dragging the day's remains. He hoped to pull his weight far enough to undermine Quentin's resistance. As they pulled, he heard a sharp rip. The jacket tore in half as both men fell to the ground from the sheer force of gravity.

It can't get any lower than this.

Lying on the ground in cold defeat, he stared at a wad of gray gum that melded unnaturally with the brown blades of grass peeking through the concrete. He was dizzy from the fall. He knew he couldn't move too quickly. The blood would surge to his throbbing head and make it worse. The dull lights from the street lamps didn't help. Neither did the maniacal laugh in front of him. He felt like he was at a carnival, passed out from one too many rides or freakish side shows. He felt his father's torn jacket in his hands. The frays of the patches were soft beneath his fingertips. The worn threads brought back his father's memory. Before he could brush his unruly brown hair from his eyes and get up to stare down the laughter, a Dunkin Donuts wrapper slapped his red, wind-broken face.

What in the hell? Never in my wildest dreams. Never. In. My. Wildest. Dreams. Bribing teethless men with dimes and fighting with old pieces of shit in the cold. Now a crusty donut wrapper. Well, maybe I can do something with this.

He stood up slowly and just as he walked away with only part of what belonged to him, the left sleeve of his father's jacket, he felt an aggressive jerk at his shoulder. From the look in his eyes and the pull at Quentin's attention, he could tell that Perkins wouldn't surrender to defeat.

"Here." He thrust the torn fabric into Quentin's hands. "I have no use for it now."

"Umm. Thanks."

"Now where's my cigarettes, you lousy punk?"

Quentin turned around and smirked. "My place. You stay here I'll get 'em for ya."

His father taught him better.

Dead Tree on Jekyll

Color Photograph

Chris McCormick

My Gramma's Kitchen

Kelly Arno

My Gramma's chair squeaks
And loses a little bit of stuffing
From between the yellowed seams
As I stand up,
Her award-winning pecan pie
Still melts on my lips.
"Watch your head!"
I almost knock the spoons
Off of their rack on the wall.
Oklahoma and South Dakota
Tremble, threaten to fall, then
Settle again in their dusty slots.
My Gramma's curtains float
On a lazy Ozark breath,
The blue and yellow lace
Reaching, trying to tickle my nose
As my Gramma so often did.
Whinnying from the next pasture,
Old Smoky begs for the sweets
From my Gramma's garden;
My Gramma's carrots and
My Gramma's lettuce and
The apples from my Gramma's tree.
My Gramma's oak tree,
Planted the day my Gramma
And my Grampa got married,
Marks the spot where
My Gramma now lays,
And I watch the grass grow
Down from the foothills,
As "Call me Granny Margaret" washes
My Gramma's dishes.

Thanksgiving

Color Photograph

Luciana Carnerio

Queen Wasp

Virginia Gribben

Why in the hell do I do this to myself? I feel like Charlie Brown running to kick the football; every time I believe something will be different, and every time I fall on my ass! Izzy Wheeler was curled in a dark leather wing chair in the corner of her Grandmother's cavernous living room, which was once again filled with at least three generations of Wheelers. There was a low hum of multiple, hushed conversations, and the lush, gold wallpaper reflected the fireplace giving everything a honey colored quality. Family members scurried from one pod to the next. *They look like a bunch of honey bees in a hive instead of a bunch of WASPs in Edgewood.*

Izzy felt the heat from the fireplace to the right, but that heat was nothing like the heat coming from the conversations; conversations that she was not being included in—*again. I can't believe that I fell for it again. No one talks to me; only at and around me. Jeff keeps telling me that I can't make something from nothing. I hate that he is always right when it comes to my family. He told me that nothing would be the same after my Grandpa died. "They don't get you honey, I don't think that they ever will." That's what he said but I still try. They are my family and my link to Big Ed. When I tried to explain this to him, he said, "If you'd just marry me, we could start our own family; one that actually likes each other! You don't need big Ed's study to remember him. I promise!" Could he be right?*

Since the death of her Grandpa Ed, she had been virtually invisible to her family. Before he died, she and her cousin Blaine had a place in the family, Grandpa Ed made sure of it. *God, I miss Big Ed, he was the heart of this family, just look at them all, the women in knee length skirt suits and the men in business suits, they look like they are ready for a fucking funeral! Well, I guess they could be; Buffy wasn't exactly specific in her message. "Family meeting, Edgewood Estate, 7:00, Saturday."*

The Wheelers had not called a family meeting since Grandpa Ed gathered the clan to announce his impending death. He had arranged for a party to be held, and then when it came time for his usual speech, instead of a simple joke and well wishes, he announced, "Family, my time has come!" They responded with polite laughter, expecting him to follow up with something crass, or silly; but instead he finished with "The doctors say that I'm a goner! They have given me three months until I kick the bucket! If I can make one request before I die, it would be that you all just unclench your asses a bit." Taking his bow, he winked at Izzy, Jeff and Blaine. They knew what he was talking about.

Izzy and Blaine had spent countless hours in Big Ed's study with him. That room was *theirs*; they used it as a playroom, a disco, a confessional or a hideout. Years later, Blaine described it to Jeff as the room that they could let their "freak flag" fly. Ed had told the cousins, countless times in the privacy of the study that he had no clue how every one of his children had taken after his wife Victoria. "You would think that one of these sons of bitches would be like me. I guess that it skipped them and was passed to you two."

I wonder what it could be this time. I see most of the usual suspects. Jackson and his family aren't here, but they never are. I don't see Rose. I'm sure that Blaine is back in New York. He never

leaves Manhattan! Jeff said that he called the other day, I should call him back soon.

Interrupting her thoughts, Izzy's mom sidled up to her, leading with her glass of Chardonnay. "When was the last time that you talked to him? Uncle Geoff said that you probably know where he is."

Looking at Izzy and her mother Elizabeth was like looking at Goofus and Gallant from a Highlights Magazine found in a doctor's waiting room. They could be the same person, but Goofus looked unkempt and Gallant shined. Elizabeth and most of the Wheeler family looked like shiny people from a toothpaste commercial: straight teeth, a perfect helmet of blonde hair and not a wrinkle on clothing or skin. Izzy shared a resemblance with her mother and aunts: blonde hair, green eyes, porcelain skin and a nice build, not too tall, not too thin. The resemblance ended with genetics however. The Wheeler women were devoted to Anne Taylor and were walking shrines dedicated to Sax Fifth Avenue; casual to them meant flats. Each woman had a weekly hair and nail appointment; only death or dismemberment could keep them from it.

Izzy, on the other hand, liked her clothes to have a past. Her job as an assistant director for an off-Broadway theater rarely called for more than jeans and a T-shirt. She scoured thrift shops looking for well-worn jeans and off the wall T-shirts, the stranger the better.

"Izzy, did you hear what I said? When did you last talk to him? Elizabeth repeated.

"Who?" was all she could get out before her mom's sisters, Gracie and Genevieve slid in next to her mother completing the green-eyed, Anne Taylored, can-can line of inquisition.

"How can you just sit there? Izzy, do you know anything about him, have you spoken to Blaine? Elizabeth, she's your daughter, ask her." Genevieve said, using her Scotch on the rocks like a boxing glove.

"Gen, darling, I'm trying to, but you know how she can be, drama, drama, drama, I should have put my foot down when she took that ridiculous job! I mean, really, what am I supposed to tell the rest of the family and our friends when they ask me what Isabelle is doing with herself. I would be mortified to admit that she directs those vulgar plays. Did I tell you that the last one had a man standing completely nude, in the center of the stage, talking about the war in Iraq? What does nudity have to do with war?"

"The writer was trying to…"

Gracie interrupted, "Oh, Elizabeth, I feel so badly for you. Izzy does love to keep us guessing. Has she told you any more about, what's his name, Jeff? My daughter Rose tells me just everything. Did I tell you that she got another promotion? They've sent her to Paris for a month for training. Wait, I have a postcard in my purse."

Genevieve, not to be outdone, interrupted, "Gracie, get my purse while you're at it, I have new pictures of Jackson's children. They couldn't be here today because his oldest, Winter, is competing in the Junior Olympics; golf, you know, she's a prodigy according to her coach."

Izzy watched to verbal sparring of her relatives with a smirk. *I'm sitting right here, I love how they talk about me like I'm the chair or the sofa. Every time I try to answer them, they talk over me like I'm an annoying child. I never noticed it until Jeff pointed it out to me. I think that I*

focused on Grandpa Ed and Blaine so much that the others just didn't register. Izzy re-adjusted her black-rimmed glasses that hide her green eyes and toyed with the fraying hem of her jeans, just waiting for her mother to take control once again.

"Gracie, I've seen the postcard. I've got a copy of the picture, Genevieve. Let's get back to the issue at hand. Now, Izzy, can you please just tell us what you know so we can figure out what to do. You may not care about the reputation of this family, but we do," said Elizabeth, in her patented chairwoman in charge voice.

Before Izzy responded to anyone, they turned to each other and started their own conversation pod centering on Izzy's stubbornness, crassness and lack of family pride.

Fuck this; I'm not sticking around to hear another round of the "Izzy Sucks" tune. Genevieve will start the song with her disgust of my job. Grace will harmonize with how I could be so pretty if I just took an interest in myself Genevieve will come back with that strange boyfriend of hers and then Mom will really bring it home with the chorus of She's just like Dad. Now, where is my purse?

Izzy walked into her Grandpa's old study to find her purse. The moment she opened the door, she was engulfed in the black-licorice smell of old books mixed with the smell of wood smoke-her Grandpa's signature scent. *God, I love the smell of this room, it smells safe.* Izzy nestled into the oversized desk chair and looked around the room. On one side of the room was a stage-like black marble fireplace and dark wood mantle and on the opposite side of the room were floor to ceiling books of all shapes and sizes. Near the fireplace was a comfy love seat; it was well worn from the rear-ends of her Grandpa's friends and business associates as well as her very own rear and of course Blaine's. *Everyone seems to be very concerned with something that has to do with Blaine. I wonder if that's why he called.*

Izzy stared at the fireplace with Blaine and Big Ed on her mind. *We did have some fun in here.*

"Grandpa, are you ready for the show?" Izzy asked through the cracked door.

"Ready and waiting Boo Boo."

Blaine entered the study first, wearing an old scarf on his head, followed by Izzy who was adorned with a scarf and a shawl. They solemnly walked to the fireplace whose marble slab doubles as their performance area. Blaine holds his hands behind his back with his shoulders shrugged girlishly and turns to Izzy.

"Well, somebody has to arrange the matches. Young people can't decide these things themselves." With this intro, Izzy and Blaine launch into their performance of Matchmaker, Matchmaker, from A Fiddler on the Roof. They twirl and sing, giving it their all, never have two little WASP's so convincingly played poor Jewish girls wishing for a husband.

Blaine has thrown himself into the performance. He takes Izzy's prop shawl and makes a veil from it singing, "Matchmaker, Matchmaker, I'll bring the veil, you bring the groom, slender and pale…"

In their mind, it was the performance of all performances; they had practiced in the playroom for hours to perfect it. Grandpa was swaying to the slightly tuneless song the kids were singing; a proud grin was on his round face. Victoria had walked in the study mid performance and watched for only a moment before Blaine had started the finale, "Playing with matches a girl can get burned.."

Before Izzy could sing her line to finish the song, Grandmother Victoria brought

down the curtain, so to speak. "Children, this is entirely inappropriate! You Grandfather is a busy man, I recall telling you NOT to disturb him!"

"Vic, honey, I love the children's show. I'm not too busy to watch it. They have been practicing all morning long!"

"Edward, do not call me Vic." Victoria hissed quietly, "I told Buffy and Elizabeth that the children could spend the afternoon with the maid as long as they did not get in the way. I could hear the screeching from my dressing room, it entirely interrupted MY day."

"I don't consider the children an interruption. They know that they are welcome in here any time." Turning to the kids with a wink in his sparkling eyes, he grandly shouted, "The show must go on! Sing away my poor husbandless Jews."
That was the first time that Izzy or Blaine had seen anyone stand up to their Grandmother, they were unsure of what to do next, so they just stood there, gaping; Blaine in his veil and Izzy in her scarf. Before walking stiffly out of the room, Victoria turned to her husband and whispered, "Edward, could you at least censor their song choices, Blaine is playing a dammed girl! Do you want him to turn queer?"

Izzy saw a look pass over her Grandpa's face that she couldn't name, but knew wasn't a good one. He rose from his chair, walked to his wife and through his clenched teeth, growled, "I think that his overbearing mother can claim that victory. I don't care what he turns into, as long as he stays as happy as he looks right now. Please leave my study."

Grandpa must have had balls made of steel; balls of steel and the patience of a saint. How did he ever end up with a woman like Grandmother Victoria? With a smile, Izzy returned to her purse hunt, finding it on the love seat. She grabbed a lighter and cigarette and turned back towards the door.

That was the first time I had heard the word queer in regards to Blaine. I wasn't sure what it meant and Grandpa didn't seem concerned so we sang on, just like he taught us. Shit, without him, I'd probably be as repressed as the rest of chicks in this family.

Slipping out of the study and down the dark, wooden hall, Izzy headed towards the French doors that led to a brick patio at the back of the house. She chose this spot because it was rarely used anymore; the outdoors wasn't climate controlled, hence the Wheelers tended to avoid it.

The patio was cool and dark. The night felt like, what she and Jeff like to call "make-out weather;" cool enough for a jacket but not enough for a coat, perfect for a blanket on the grass in a park, with a radio and a couple of beers. She was sure no one in the house would understand her if she tried to explain make-out weather, no one but her cousin Blaine, who was obvious in his absence, as usual.

"I thought I might find you out here-smoking." says a nasal voice from the door. Her cousin Diana stepped out closing the door haughtily behind her. "Mother said that you won't tell them anything. I thought maybe I could get it out of you. This is important to all of us. I mean, how embarrassing, I can't even imagine what the people at the club would say if they knew. "

"Knew what Di? Your mom only left the time and place on my voice mail. I get the feeling that everyone thinks that I should know what's going on. I--"

Before she could even finish her last sentence Diana came back with, "You two

are always in on the jokes, but this is no joke! This is serious." With her hands on hips with her head jutting forward like a hen's she cackled on, "Don't think that I didn't hear about the last play that you worked on! I heard that there was a character named Diana who had a stick in her ass throughout the entire play. I'm sure that the two of you giggled for hours over that one, but do not think that it bothered me in the least, no one that I know would be caught dead in that theater that you work in! You are crass, and common. How we can be related is beyond me. You and my brother don't even deserve to have the Wheeler name. I can't even stand to look at you!" The hands that were just at her hips now fly heavenward and with a final theatrical flair Diana spins on her pink kitten-heels sending her blonde hair flying in a judgmental arc, leaving Izzy standing in a cloud of her own smoke.

"Up you dosage, Diana." She murmured to no one; or so she thought. From the dark corner of the porch she heard a laugh and a snort. Dropping her cigarette, she turned slowly toward the laugh. The man behind the laugh was her Uncle Geoff. Geoff was usually as stiff the Washington Monument and as humorous as a root canal. Tonight, however, he was rumpled and a little blurry around the edges; his entire body was slurring to match his words.

"Do you know when it happened?"

"Uncle Geoff, what's happened to Blaine? Everyone in there seems to think that I'm in on something, or that I even know what's going on. Is he ok, I haven't seen or talked to him in wee—?"

"No, he's not *ok* you liberal hippie bitch. He's my only son, the one to carry on the Wheeler name and now… I can't say it; it makes me want to throw up." Just like that, his wants became a reality and Uncle Geoff turned slightly on the stone bench and heaved toward the flowerbed. In an instant, brie and crackers and Dewar's and water replaced the insults coming from her uncle's mouth. *What in the hell is going on here. Has Blaine been hurt? Oh, shit, could he be HIV positive? Our friend just tested positive, could he be next. I hope I'm overreacting!*

Now, more confused than ever, Izzy slipped back in the house to alert Geoff's wife, Buffy that her husband was, well, barfing. Buffy, however, was nowhere to be found. *He's a grown man; he can take care of himself. Let him tell the maid about the mess. I need to find my cell, Blaine needs to tell me what in the hell is going on with the drama kings and queens of Edgewood.*

Before Izzy could return to the study for her phone, she encountered the grand-dame of the Wheelers: her Grandmother Victoria, in the expansive hallway near the bathroom. The hugeness of the hallway made her grandmother look even smaller in comparison. Victoria Wheeler was a small and secretly imposing woman. The silver bun on top of her head could be the wick to a very volatile bomb, but her slight figure and soft green eyes always tricked Izzy into forgetting that her grandmother had the power to detonate her own bomb and an itchy trigger finger. "Hey, Gram, you look great! Where have you been?"

"Please do not call me Gram; I've told you before, Gram sounds so vile. You may call me Grandmother, Mrs. Wheeler, or Grandmother Victoria, you may choose. As to where I have been, I do not think that you are in any place to question me, young lady. I have put up with enough from the two of you. Your grandfather ruined any glimmer

of decorum that you may have learned form your parents or myself. Blaine has shown that he has no regard for the reputation of the family, but I had always hoped that you would become more like your mother once your grandfather stopped influencing you, but instead you seem to have found a man that is just like him!"

She thinks that Jeff is like Big Ed? Good. I think so too. Maybe that's why they liked each other so much. Oh, wait, I think that she's waiting for an apology.

"Sorry Grandmother", she said in a semi-robotic voice. *I feel like I'm going crazy. Someone would have told be by now if Blaine was hurt, I hope. What in the hell has their panties in a wad? What's that in the hag's hands?*

Grandmother Victoria was grasping a newspaper clipping in her dusty hands. Everything that Izzy pondered flew right out of her head as she focused on her grandmother's hands. Izzy tried to catch a look at the clipping, but before she could get a good look at it, out of nowhere, Aunt Buffy tore out of the coat room; in one hand she had a bottle of beer and in the other, an orange prescription bottle. She lunged at Grandmother Victoria and tore the paper from her hand screaming, "Give me that you wretched bitch!" and with the grace of a drunken ballerina, plowed past the women and into the bathroom. Buffy had a slurred look, not unlike her husband's, but with a more dramatic edge. *Shit, she looks like a heroine-chic raccoon.* There were tear trails running the length of her nipped and tucked face. The theatrics of the evening were coming to a climax for Izzy. *Aunt Buffy had a beer. Aunt Buffy was carrying a real-live, hops and barley beer."* No one in Izzy's family drank beer. To them, beer was as white trash as NASCAR and airbrushing. The beer was more of a surprise than the guerilla style attack or the fitting epithet.

Izzy looked to her grandmother for a reaction. Buffy's rampage knocked Victoria right out of one of her Chanel pumps and she looked quite vulnerable, for the moment. In a moment of tenderness, Izzy tried to assist her grandmother in righting herself.

"Gram, you OK?" *What kind of rabbit hole have I fallen down?*

"You insubordinate girl! Do you listen to anything that I say? I don't know where we went wrong with you. I suppose that we should have forced you into finishing school, but you grandfather wouldn't hear of it! I am through with you too! I am taking you and that Blaine, yes, Blaine from my will." She turned and limped down the hall still wearing just one shoe, but as haughty as ever.

Watching her grandmother retreat, Izzy just stood there shaking her head with her mouth gaping like a fish on land. *I guess that's what I get for trying to help. Maybe if I punch her, she'll put me back in the will. Jeff was right, it's useless to try and figure them out. I do need to figure out why Buffy seems to have lost her mind though. OK, I need to see that paper.*

"Aunt Buffy, honey, is there anything that you need?" She simpered through the door. "I'm worried about you."

Ha! If I can't shock it out of them, I'll southern bell it out of them. I learned a trick or two in college; I knew there had to be some benefit of having a debutant as a college roommate! Watch out Buffy, I'm coming for your secrets.

With a *don't scare the loony smile*, Izzy slides open the heavy door to find Buffy, slumped in a pile on the bathroom floor. Green eyes meet raccoon and Izzy swoops to grab the paper from her aunt's hand.

Izzy's mind went blank for a moment and when the came-to she found herself

sitting on cold Italian marble with tears running down her face and an aching in her middle. Through her tears of amusement and relief she re-read the newspaper clipping in her hand. There, in full regalia was a picture of her cousin Blaine, or as the caption read, "Miss Gay New York-Blaire Wheeler of Edgewood." The picture next to the caption was at first glance, her aunt Buffy in a sequence gown, only on second glance could she see that it looked like aunt Buffy with an Adam's apple.

With a tuck of his penis, a slip of a dress and the change of a letter, Blaire-nee-Blaine had finally found a way to carry on the family name, just not in the fashion that was expected. *His dad was whining about Blaine carrying on the family name, man, he made sure that the Wheeler name would not only be carried on, but that it would live in infamy in the town of Edgewood. I wonder what the most upsetting part about this is for them. Is it that he's gay? That he's a drag queen? That he used the family name? Damn, I just assumed that everyone had figured him out; once again I gave my family more credit than they deserve. They acted like something really bad happened to Blaine. I actually thought that they cared. Stupid me!*

Wiping away her tears of laughter, Izzy pulled herself off of the cold bathroom floor and offered a hand to Buffy. Buffy, in turn, looked into Izzy's eyes and then slowly raised her middle finger and passed out. The evening was finally complete. *I've been ignored, insulted, thrown up at, screamed at, and dis-inherited in the span of an hour. Charlie Brown running after the football-that's me!*

Izzy shrugged her shoulders and turned to leave. *Mom's wrong, I'm not just like Grandpa. He stuck it out in this family until the day he died. I'm not going to last that long. I can't.*

Izzy left the house in Edgewood without even a good-bye. She returned home to Jeff and as she crawled into their cozy bed she leaned over and whispered into Jeff's ear, "You're right, I don't need them, I have all the family I need right here."

Overlooking the Peloponnese

Color Photograph

Chris McCormick

Appendix #1 – Fear Of Stocking

Alex J. Sandoval

Yes, constantly.

I HATE it. It drives me mad. Every time that big, hairy, hot, sweaty arm reaches down in the box and systematically removes me and my family and friends from our home. Place us on a cold steel prison floor, with a view to all the other captive prisoners, and no way to help them. Every once and a while, one of us'll escape.

Once, Chef-boy and Ohs ran away with one of the smaller fleshlings. A week later, Ohs was back...but Chef-boy was nowhere to be seen. I inquired as to where he might be, so I could bring him up to date on the next suicide revolt and escape run. They were always painful and gory, but it usually ended up that those of us who survived to the checkered hell would get picked up by one of the fleshlings and nurtured.

So I thought.

Ohs told me a horror story about what had happened that week. Apparently, he and Chef-boy were able to escape the Red Dragon of Light that guarded our exit. Ohs theorized that if one was able to get close enough to obtain the sacred light of the dragon without coming face to face with it, access was granted into the great beyond. I didn't believe him. I was sure that staying away from the Dragon was the key, infact, I had once heard a fable by the back row with the Elders...that if one was able to shed his outer prison garb and strip down to nothing, one could easily go beyond the mirrored gates into the Great Beyond...

...but I'm straying. According to Ohs, the Great Beyond was all but "great". After an excruciating and lengthy voyage through the Sea of Light Blue Cotton, Ohs was finally freed from the weight of Loaf above him. That stupid bastard refused to stop taking Yeast Steroids, and it invariably made him very fat.

Once inside, Ohs and Chef-Boy were locked away in the Dark Dungeon for several days, until finally the fleshy hand reached in their direction. It picked up both him and Chef-boy... the Fleshy began to examine him, and then chose Chef-Boy.

What came next was sickening. Ohs was left on a blinding white table for later sorting, but he was given a CLEAR view of Chefies torture...almost as if to say, "Remember this, for you are next." First, they tore open his head, and shook him by his rear until his innards had plopped into a scorching hot disk, where he was burned and then (the most shocking part) the Fleshies distributed his essence, and DEVOURED HIM. It was here that I and other listeners vomited and lost consciousness.

Ohs was in a state of panic, and in the confusion of what had happened, he lost control

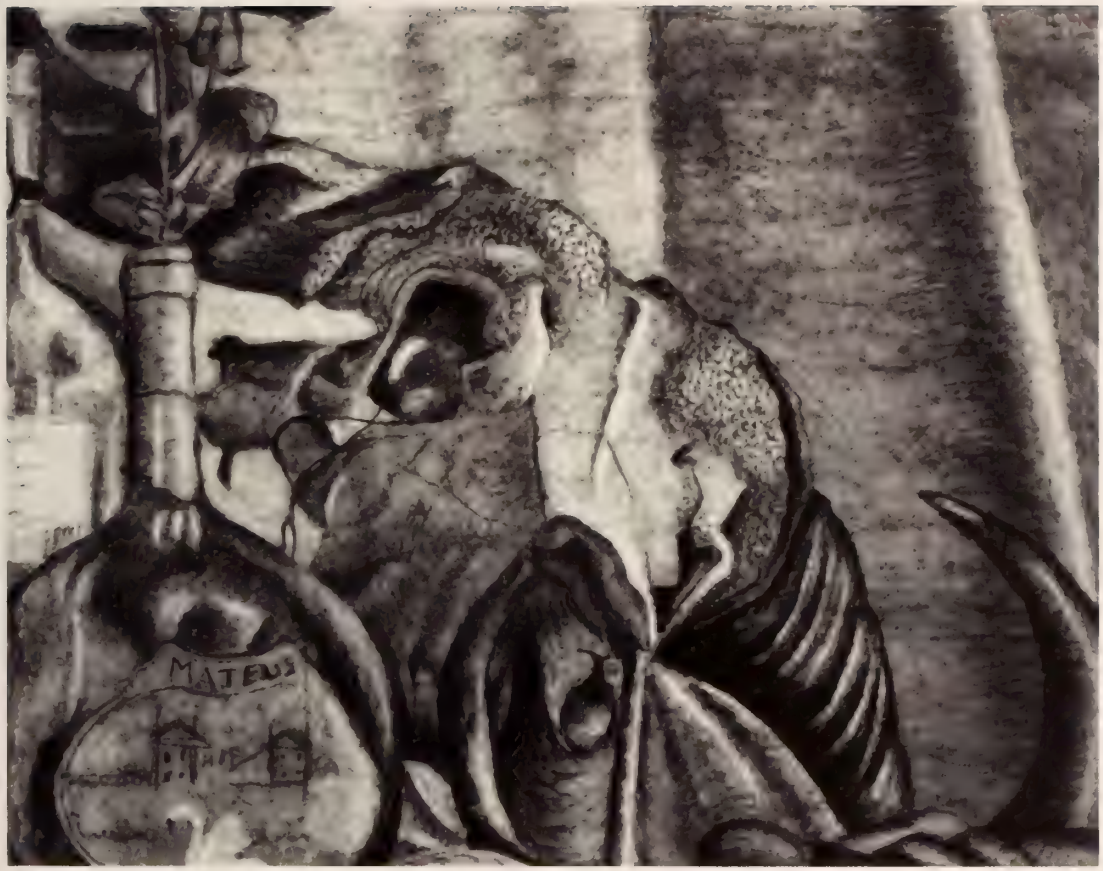
of his bowels, and...well, needless to say, the Fleshies no longer had use of him. He was "tainted", he heard them comment.

Ohs retold the tale countless times, and eventually shared with us his return when he felt able. After more examination, and a close-call with the Ripping Mechanism, he retraveled the Journey, and emerged again through the Gates.

There, he was tossed about violently, and seemed to be exchanged for something of greater taste...crumpled green labels. I imagined these were the skins of old comrades to be used as garnish for some diabolic "meal". The Fleshies I had once beckoned to with my silent screams had become the subject of my nightmares.

Ohs came and went, as did many others, whom I pray encountered better fates than poor Chef-boy. But I, now an Elder in the back row, tell my horror stories to the children who have come after me.

Despite my age, I too, fear being stocked...



Still Life

Charcoal Drawing
Anita Brunner

Self Portrait

Charcoal Drawing
Anita Brunner

Salt

Jessica Martinez

The table
—long sigh of heavy oak—
my father sits at
its top,
is seated to my right,
will not abdicate.

My brother
fumbles with his fork,
moving
strategically
between green beans
and mashed potatoes—

Mother makes no petition:
pecking at her plate,
bird bites
in between
slow, shallow sips—
staring down

into bone white china.
(I am not
my mother's daughter.)
Across the table,
he has now annexed
the hominy dish.

Tomorrow,
this table will seat one less.
He
will no longer
command me
to "pass the salt."

And six months later,
I will not write home
to tell him, folded
white napkin in my lap,
"I am eating cans of corn
for dinner, Dad."

World

Acrylic Jet Painting
Jie Chen

Mirror

Elena Fodera

I am a butterfly with orange wings.
I am the only one.
I am a waterfall.
A thoughtful spirit resides within words
flowing
from one line
to the next.
I love,
hard and genuine,
and I feel the seasons
with all my heart.
I am a leaf, or a star in the night.
I am balanced.
I am not the full moon, and I am not the sun.
I dance to sweet music and wind in the trees,
free.
I am a fading memory,
a yellowing photograph of
anything beautiful,
once the eye of somebody's universe.
I am barefoot on the dock and peering over the edge.
I've known for sure and been mistaken,
both times at once and each a thousand.
I reach and twist and grow with the vines
up,
along and
over the fence,
sometimes uninvited.
I am something to this world though,
a child of earth and stone, love and wisdom,
holding a candle and walking out into darkness.
I am a cold, clear night.
I am the calm that awaits you
underwater.

Contributors

Kelly Arno is a Junior majoring in English with Teacher Certification Major. Regarding the inspiration for "My Gramma's Kitchen," Kelly notes, "My gramma has been gone for years now, but my grampa remarried quickly to a woman who insisted that we call her 'Granny Margaret.' I resented her for a long time for the way she used my gramma's possessions as though they were her own. 'Granny Margaret' would never be my gramma, and I would never call her my gramma or my 'granny.'"

Anita Brunner is an exchange student from Austria. Her major at her home university is Art History and for her two semesters at AASU it is Fine Arts. She believe that for an Art Historian it is important not only to know about the artists, but also to be familiar with techniques and materials. Her favorite techniques are drawing and sculpting. She says, "I like to experiment and to meet a challenge, pushing assignments as far as possible. It is a great experience to get to know my own limits and overcome them."

Luciana Carneiro is a Senior graduating in December 2007 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. She hopes to be able to open her own photography studio in Atlanta following graduation. Of her art, she says, "Sometimes I simply document the world around me; other times I create my own. The inspiration for my art comes from the need to express a mood or capture a look. I try to see the things that others glance over, and make them stand out."

Jie Chen is a Freshman majoring in English. After meeting a Chinese girl who escaped from her family in Colorado, where she was confined by her white husband for three years, Jie felt compelled to write "Tom's Wig" and tell her story. Jie reflects, "I still remember the lonely and miserable girl was so timid and so weak. And actually, this story is written for her and I wish she is getting better now." "Tom's Wig" has also been accepted for presentation at this year's Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Convention in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Erin Christian is a Junior and English major pursuing a minor in Writing, and she plans to pursue graduate studies in Literature after graduating Armstrong. Erin wrote "For Better or For Worse" as a comic story to explore the feelings of awkwardness common to everyone when placed in unfamiliar social situations. Weddings are just occasional, and intimate, enough so that they drift around the margins of most young people's comfort zones, and when attending a wedding as the young girlfriend of a member of the involved family, the feeling of intrusion into a private ceremony can be simultaneously amusingly gut-wrenching.

Michelle Crabb is a Junior majoring in Information Technology. She previously spent five years in the US Air Force. Since high school, writing has always been one of her favorite hobbies. Her short term goals are to finish her degree and to get a nice steady job while writing on the side. "Ode to the Help Desk" was based on a mixture of personal

experience and ill wishes for a cruel boss she once had. All of the user phone calls in her story were based on actual calls that she received when she worked at a network help desk.

Hai Dang is a graduating senior dual majoring in information technology and theatre. The inspiration for "Fireflies" came from an auditions class that he took in the Fall 2006 semester. After a fellow classmate performed a heartfelt and emotional monologue, he decided that he needed to find a monologue like that for his repertory. About 80% of the content in "Fireflies" is based on events that occurred in his personal life. Although the piece is about what one gains and loses in love, the overtone of it is that memories can be triggered by the slightest stimuli. The piece was chosen and featured in this year's "New Voices" production.

Leah DiNatale is a Junior majoring in English Literature. After graduation, she plans to obtain a MAT degree and teach English composition to high school students. She wants her students to understand why literature matters. Leah is a closet fiction writer. Inspired by her experience with the craziness that is the pageant world, "Baby Doll" explores the darker side of pageantry.

Elena Fodera is a freshman majoring in English and minoring in Philosophy. In the future, she plans to finish at Armstrong and possibly go on to graduate school at UGA to major in Creative Writing. The poem "Mirror" is a literary self-portrait with each image as a reference to her qualities and experiences. "Mother Nature's Garden" was written when she was sixteen, and was inspired by a dream in which she visited an exquisite garden. She was compelled to capture its beauty in words and make it the home of Nature herself.

Jennifer Henderson is a Junior majoring in Art Education. "Light" was inspired by the life inside everyday objects. Finding the energy in inanimate objects is one of her passions in photography. She says, "I try to see things like this broken lamp as part of a bigger picture, not just as trash. My goal for my photography is to try to show others what I see and to expand their view beyond traditional beauty."

Jessica Martinez considers herself indebted to the Language, Literature, and Philosophy Department at Gamble Hall (especially, Dr. James Smith). She is this year's recipient of the Lillian Spencer Award for Poetry. She will graduate from Armstrong in May 2007 with a BA in English, a BA in Spanish, and a certificate in Latin American Studies. Jessica has recently accepted an offer of admission to the Graduate School from the Department of English at the University of Notre Dame, where she will study poetry in the Creative Writing Program. Upon completion of her MFA, she plans to return to Savannah to write and teach.

Chris McCormick is a graduating senior majoring in English and minoring in Art. Last summer he studied abroad in Greece. He currently works as a tutor at AASU's Writing Center. Chris states, "I simply love art. I find great joy in photography. It is a passion I hope to take with me through my future adventures. Many of my photographs are

inspired by my love for the outdoors. I aim for what I have pre-visualized and try to welcome what I have not. I try to capture what words can't, and I have a great time doing it."

Victoria Miller is a Junior majoring in English. "Breaching the Gaps" was written for a creative writing class but had been formulating itself in her mind for a while prior to that. Victoria notes, "I only needed an excuse to start writing it out and bringing the nameless characters in my head to life of paper. Inspirations to my writing come from authors I enjoy to read. Among these I should reference L. J. Smith whose series *The Forbidden Game* initiated my love of Norse mythology. It is Sherrilyn Kenyon's wit and Diana Gabaldon's historical details that serve to remind me why I love to read, and therefore I always try to channel them when I am writing myself."

Mia Montgomery is a Sophomore majoring in Art Education and this year's recipient of the Lillian Spencer Award for Art. The "Stuck in a Box" series was inspired by last semester's overwhelming feeling of everything happening at once. Mia describes, "On the outside I looked normal and dressed nice, but on the inside I felt trapped and was panicking. I showed the progression of my anger and frustration through my colors getting darker in each piece. I went through over 300 images until I had the perfect 3 pictures to complete my piece, and I would like to thank Jim Kincaid for taking about 250 of those images for me." She plans on furthering her "Stuck in a Box" series by hopefully finding other models that are willing to contort their bodies into awkward and painful poses.

Joe O'Connor is a Junior majoring in history. He wrote "Die Gurke" because he has taken five years of German and has always wondered if he could survive Germany with what he knew. According to Joe, "I have a feeling that I would speak just like Malcolm, though I would have conjugated most of my verbs correctly."

Chad Roberts is an eight year resident of Savannah who recently received an honorable discharge from the Army after serving on active duty for eight years. He plunged into college life in August 2006 and is currently seeking a Bachelor's Degree in Radiology. Both works featured in *Calliope* were inspired by his role as a Non Commissioned Officer (NCO) in the Army. Having no formal painting instructions or training, he paints mostly for enjoyment, and it serves as an outlet from stress. Chad says, "I painted Geometrical Maze after a stressful day of dealing with soldiers, it made me think of the different directions we are all pulled in throughout our lives. Classical Martini was actually inspired by a woman I knew; she thought her outlet was alcohol until it proved to be unsafe."

Stephanie Roberts is a graduating senior majoring in English and minoring in gender and women's studies. Regarding her story, Stephanie says, "This was my first attempt at creative fiction. I began writing this story with this image of a man walking by and watching two homeless men fight like dogs over a jacket in the cold. However, I recognized the limitations of this particular third person perspective; if I funneled all

the events through the eyes of the outsider, I would not have the opportunity to reveal any backstory of the fighting men to my readers. Once I figured out that I wanted my story to explore the issues of the homeless subculture and the rules for survival, I shifted gears and focused on Quentin Miller, a young homeless man who is cynical and elitist about his standing in the Woodward homeless community, as my protagonist."

Mandy Rowe is a senior graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. "Facing the Beast" was inspired by her own fears of getting in front of the classroom and speaking in front of her peers. Mandy reflects, "It had always been a fear I had since I was a small child, and when the story came about, I was enrolled in an Education class where I had to do Practicum, which included teaching two lessons to middle school students. While my fear is not as profound as my character's, I feel it truly expresses how hard it can be for anyone to overcome his or her fears but that it is possible."

Alex J. Sandoval is an art major with an emphasis on graphic design. He plans to do his best to become a jack of all trades, working on movies, TV, games and anything he can get his hands on. "Appendix #1: The Fear of Stocking" comes from an internet message board wherein the topic was "Are you afraid of S-T-A-L-K-I-N-G." He read it, and saw S-T-O-C-K-I-N-G. His imagination went off without him, and he just wrote down what came to him.

Dave Williams is an English major and this year's recipient of the Lillian Spencer Award for Fiction. Speaking on what inspired "Randall," Dave states, "I heard a news story on NPR about several young men being arrested after seeing a picture of a beautiful woman in the obituaries and attempting to dig up the body for their own personal needs. Needless to say, this was revolting, but it made me wonder what kind of mind set would someone have to be in, in order to do such a thing. Still, "Randall" isn't a morbid story about necrophilia intended to shock people. It is really a story about friendship, unrequited love, and kindness in the worst of situations. So crank up some Slayer, watch a little wrestling, have a sip of some Boone's farm mixed with cheap vodka, buy yourself a little plastic flower in a conspicuous container at a gas station, and enjoy 'Randall.'"

Jeremy Windus is a recent 2006 graduate of AASU's history department. He took "al-Maghribiyyah 2" in the souks of the Jamaa'al Fina in Marrakech, Morocco." Jeremy asserts, "There is no deeper meaning; I imagine that if you were you to go there and catch the light at exactly the right moment, you might see something similar. The purpose of a good photo is to see something amazing and then document it. Mundane or the exotic, high or low brow, one can find epiphanies anywhere. I don't claim to be using some special technique (it's digital and edited)—I found an extraordinary image and captured it. Perhaps if artists genuinely cared more about making something both beautiful and accessible than they do about the artistic and intellectual one-up-man-ship that presently pervades the plastic arts, they would find audiences in their galleries. Until then—see you at the movies."